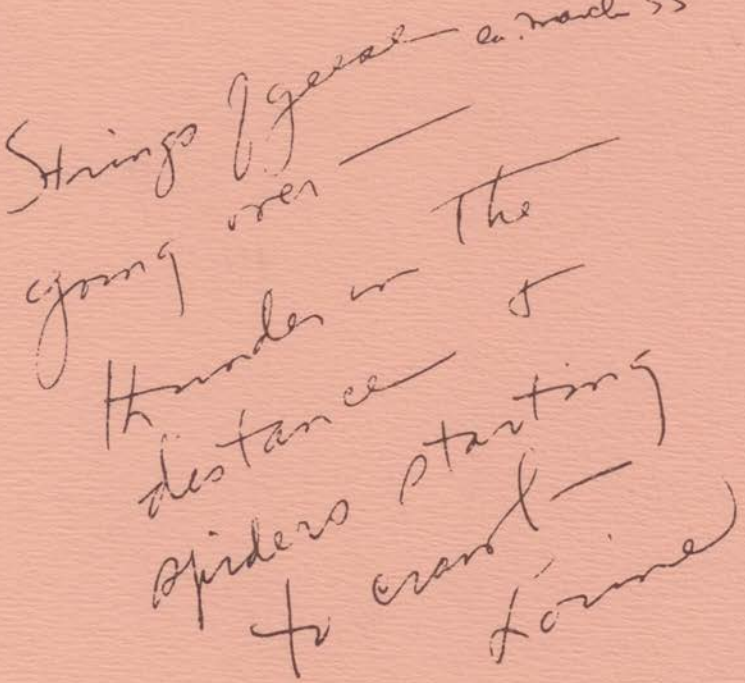
# line

number six



fall 1985

# line

number six

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and its Modernist Sources

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As a journal published in co-operation with The Contemporary Literature Collection, *Line* will reflect in its content the range of the collection. The materials it plans to publish—archival items, interviews, essays, review/commentaries, and bibliographies—will be related to the line of post-1945 Canadian, American, and British writers whose work issues from, or extends, the work of Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, H.D., Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson.

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Cover: section of a letter by Lorine Niedecker.

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# contents

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

We are pleased to include in this issue some material from the "New Poetics Colloquium: A Celebration of New Writing," a conference sponsored by the Kootenay School of Writing, August 22-24, 1985, at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design in Vancouver. The essay/talks by Lyn Hejinian and Bob Perelman were read there, and another participating writer Bruce Andrews sent us his compressed review shortly after the gathering. Readers can look forward to the future publication of the entire proceedings by the Kootenay School of Writing.

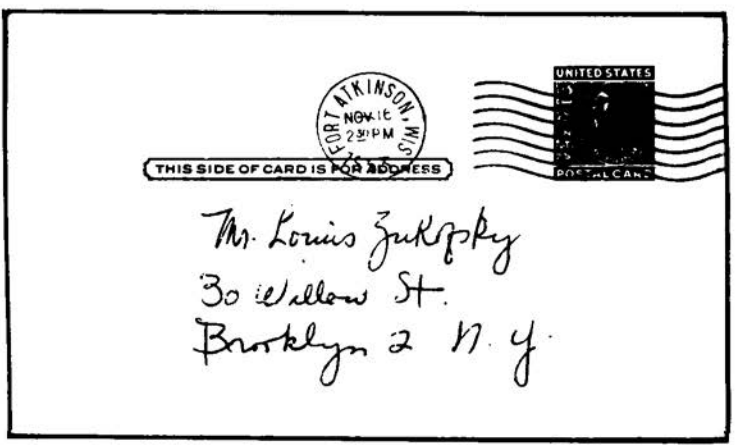
*The Guard* by Lyn Hejinian is published by Tuumba. Bob Perelman's *Primer* is available from This Press; *The First World* is forthcoming. Roof Books has issued Bruce Andrews's recent book *Wobbling*. Rumour is that *Zygal* by bpNichol is finally forthcoming from Coach House. George Bowering's latest book of poems, *Seventy-one Poems for People*, has been published by RDC Press. Longspoon Press has published Daphne Marlatt's *Touch to my tongue* and has also issued a new edition of her *Steveston*. Jenny Penberthy has recently completed a Ph.D. study, *Lorine Niedecker and Louis Zukofsky: Her Poems and Letters*. Robert Hogg's essay is taken from a forthcoming book on Charles Olson, *Maximus in Dogtown: A Topology of the Soul*. Brian Edwards who sent us his piece from Australia has essays forthcoming in the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* and *Essays on Canadian Writing*. Peter Quartermain is writing a study of Basil Bunting. My apology to John Tutlis for calling him "Charles" in the last issue.

RM
December 26, 1985

POEMS FROM LETTERS:

THE
LORINE NIEDECKER-LOUIS ZUKOFSKY
CORRESPONDENCE

BY JENNY PENBERTHY



JENNY PENBERTHY

# Poems From Letters:
# The Lorine Niedecker–Louis Zukofsky Correspondence

The flood is subsiding and maybe the monsoon has passed. The birds and animals came close, practically inside the house because on two sides I had only a couple of feet of land. A flood in the summer here is like a tropical jungle. The Amazon flowed through just in front of my thick growth of dogwood. Here a large (very fat) muskrat swam—they seem to swim with their noses as that's what you notice first—and came out on the shore to sun himself. What's more wet looking when it's wet than a rat? My family of king rails worked for food, whacking at little crab-like things sailing along but rails are really very shy. Once a rabbit and a rail were eating away both absorbed, looking down—suddenly they came face to face and both jumped back. Rabbits not having bills are quite peaceful creatures—and always nibbling—it's a wonder there's any grass left in this world. I seem to have planted my gladioli for them. Living in the teeming tropics under jungle law I wasn't surprised to find two blood spots on my cement steps and not far away a decapitated young rabbit. I had turtles too of course in my mud flat—I can't be sure of the difference between their noises and bull frogs' but I think it's turtles that have that deep thing, always three times, from evening to two in the morning. I'd wake up in my sleep and wonder what all those dogs were doing barking around my house. One day there was a water spaniel (rhinoceros) plowing through—I soon got him out of there with my cannon-like voice and clapping of hands (bring-em-back-alive-Niedecker) as every time a dog gets excited over a bird and jumps on the soft lawn he leaves a hole. Lots of snakes of course, one disporting himself on a young willow like Spanish moss. I notice frogs get eaten in quantities by almost everything. Mozart's Air and Chopin much too delicate for this country but beautiful moonlight nights.

(August, 1950)[1]

This is an extract from one of the many letters Lorine Niedecker wrote to Louis Zukofsky during their 40-year friendship. The pages that follow provide an overview of the correspondence—particularly Niedecker's side of it—and of the substantial role that it plays in the composition of her poems.

In the mid-1930s when Niedecker was still experimenting with different poetic styles, Zukofsky remarked that her letters were her best writing. Apart from their importance as critical and biographical documents, the letters—Niedecker's largest production—make compelling reading in themselves. Both she and Zukofsky edited her side of the correspondence and what remains is an often uneven distribution of letters and fragments from the years 1937 to 1970. Incomplete as they are, the 600-odd mostly typed pages constitute the only substantial surviving prose history of Niedecker's poetic career up to 1964. They go some distance towards reconstructing the background of a poet who is not yet a visible part of American literary history.

Zukofsky also wrote more letters to Niedecker than to any other friend. "On Valentine's Day to Friends," written in 1952, places her among his closest.

The hearts I lift out of snow
    So few,
The one, two or three, say few
    Friends who
Eye a heart, wish well what
    I do,
Befriend its festival
    When to
Persist I sing of Celia and
    Of Paul
To R'lene and Edward, Lorine,
    Or all—
Tags, Rene—that can with a red heart,
    Valentine,
Brush a white-velvet heart in snow
    falling deep to speak
    *Be mine.*

(*All*, p. 141)

Little evidence remains of their friendship in the thirties other than three fragments of her letters (tentatively dated 1937) and a fuller but equally scrappy selection of his. The correspondence is intimate and punctuated with square brackets that serve as a characteristically restrained signal of deep understanding. In a letter dated "pre-1936" by Niedecker, Zukofsky explains the significance of the brackets. They signify, he suggested, the gap of distance that divides the two

friends, a gap that is simultaneously framed and narrowed by their rapport. Both poets use the brackets throughout their correspondence (though less frequently after the 1930s).

They share talk about their physical ailments—in 1968 she writes, "a strange age: ill health is more interesting than good health" (December 27, 1968)—and about their finances ("phynances"); they send annual Valentines and birthday and Christmas presents; Celia and Louis urge her to move permanently to their Old Lyme cottage in Connecticut—she talks of merging their "two civilizations"; and Niedecker provides ceaseless admiration for all three Zukofskys. Whatever the personal ties, her chief preoccupation was always poetry. "In after years if they ever talk about me and ask 'was she ever in love' they'll have to say, 'yes, she was in love with Zukofsky's words'" (January 12, 1947).

Niedecker's letters give full accounts of the difficulties of her daily life but also, incidentally, of the opportunities that it provides for her particular poetic temperament. Besides the seasonal floods there are smaller domestic struggles, many of which become subjects for poems—the endless mowing, the chopping down of trees and the competition with rabbits and frost for vegetables and flowers. The details are all included in her letters to Zukofsky. Nothing is too domestic to record. Her letter-writing style is chatty and unstudied. She combines easily the ironic juxtapositions, the oblique allusions and the insights of a practising poet at work and talking to another.

Zukofsky is quite clearly her artistic life-line and, of course, her closest friend. His letters and the less regular notes from Celia and Paul help to make it possible for her to manage the rigours of a lonely life on Black Hawk Island. She wrote to him on April 1, 1956: "The world is so busy rushing past my door on road and river that it makes me feel I'm going somewhere to write to Willow St." Besides offering her the sustaining engagement of friendship, the correspondence crucially serves her poetry. It provides her, first of all, with literary conversation which is not locally available. Zukofsky keeps her in touch with his own circle. She asks him about Basil Bunting over the North Sea, Ezra Pound in Pisa and St. Elizabeths, and in New York, William Carlos Williams, Charles Reznikoff and Marianne Moore. Zukofsky replies in detail to her questions about his work; he offers suggestions for improvements to her own poems; he passes on letters from literary friends; he keeps her supplied with magazines and newspapers; he recommends reading. She types his poems, comments on them, and immerses herself in the tradition he espouses to the point where, in 1952, after reading a manuscript copy of "*A*"-12 (a poem dense with literary and personal allusion), she is able to boast that she has understood the poem without the aid of the bibliographical notes he offered her. His reading was hers too. Even so, her judgements about good and bad poetry are confidently declared: "Deckers have gotten out for 1945 August Derleth and

Ruth Lechlitner, both tripe, especially the former ... HD has a new book, not, I understand, of the common speech" (April 25, 1945). She doesn't defer to him.

Over the years, Niedecker had urged Zukofsky to keep only three of her letters. However, she clearly felt some ambivalence about the finality of her instructions:

> Zu, why don't you clean out your files of my letters since June 1946?—You have from the old days the letter on the visit to the Kumlien cabin. Now you have the one on BP's death and funeral. And you have this. Paul has the one I mailed him the other day. OK? You have three letters from me. What you should do is clip—but Lord no, you haven't the time—it isn't worth it. Just three.
>
> (February 14, 1952)

Zukofsky chose to keep the file. On a visit to New York in June 1947, she and Zukofsky had edited all her letters to date. The remaining letters leave little indication of why the editing began at all, but Zukofsky's insistence that it be done suggests that he expected his letters might eventually be read. He evidently preferred that the more personal content be removed. It was his habit to preserve the history of his own manuscripts with painstaking care, as if he were preparing them for an archive. The knowledge that editing of one kind or the other would take place must have protected both these fastidious writers from impeding self-consciousness.

In 1953 Zukofsky decided to gather for publication a selection of letters written to him by friends between the years 1927 and 1953. He planned to include selections of letters from Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Basil Bunting, Niedecker, and others, and to arrange them so as to present an informal history of modern poetry within an immediate, lived context. Again he turned to the task of editing letters he had received from Niedecker. He made even more cuts in those they had been through earlier. In 1961, after failing to get permissions to publish either Ezra Pound's or Basil Bunting's letters, Zukofsky was forced to abandon the project. Niedecker's letters continue to be heavily edited until 1960, probably still for the contemplated book, but thereafter the editing is cursory and the letters that survive are intact. In 1964, in exchange for the publication of *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, the Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin accepted Zukofsky's books, manuscripts, letters and papers. Niedecker's edited letters and a limited sample of her poetry and prose manuscripts were among them.

What remains of Zukofsky's side of the correspondence is also only a fraction of its original size. The selection of letters and fragments[2] now held by the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center,[3] was made entirely by Niedecker. Only about forty letters and twenty postcards remain uncut. The rest

of the collection exists in tantalizing pieces which she mounted on blank paper, numbered and ordered roughly by date. Most of them are undated though occasionally she has approximated, e.g. "Summer 1945." Parts of the letters are marked up—underlined, encircled, titled (e.g. "Frobenius," "When LZ first saw Pound's Cantos," etc.) and with some the scissored context is provided in her hand. The marks of different pens on the same passages suggest that the editing took place over an extended period of time. Niedecker had completed one, perhaps the first, editing of his letters in 1951:

> If you—when you come here and read your letters to me—excerpts I've kept (on general topics more or less as I've explained to you, nothing that could bring embarrassment to anyone—you'll see what a wonderful man of literature you really are!
>
> (September 28, 1951)

She has to assure him a number of times that she has destroyed all the entirely personal content.[4] She writes on February 13, 1961: "I've cut out purely personal and *strong* comment that might embarrass somebody. Actually I don't have to cut out very much but my aim was to save those parts that are so good I couldn't bear to discard 'em." It was for her own parallel edition, prepared but never published, of Zukofsky's letters to her that Niedecker did most of the cutting that leaves his half of the correspondence in its present fragmented state. In 1965, with his permission, she prepared a selection of his side of the correspondence which he eventually was to refuse to allow her to publish. The HRHRC has no record of either original or carbon copies of the 370 page typescript, both of which were in Zukofsky's possession. But at least the actual letters and fragments have survived; the HRC bought them from Niedecker in 1969. With the money she and her husband built a garage on their property and named it, the University of Texas.

Niedecker's editing is not strikingly different from Zukofsky's. She saved a great deal of his talk about poetry and poets. It is rather surprising, and gratifying, to find that she made no special effort to exclude her own presence; she saved many of his comments on *her* work—praise, advice, and passages (particularly those about Paul) that explain the origins of much of her poetry. The editing of both sides of the correspondence results in the shaping of, even redefinition of, their private communication. The remaining letters have an air of intimacy, of shared talk; their subject matter withstands public scrutiny but still reveals much about the poets, their poetry, and their times. In the poems too, there is the same judicious mix of public and private. Furthermore, the work of editing—the effort towards ellipsis and compression—is ideally suited to their critical-poetic preferences. The edited letters themselves move toward

art—an art of quotation, of collage-montage (which both poets refine in their poetry) and an art of the intersection of public and private life.

The successive editings for the two projected collections are in fact later stages of artistic endeavour. Letter-writing itself was closely tied to the composition of Niedecker's and Zukofsky's poems. Both poets, for example, quote from each other's letters in poems. Niedecker's letter on June 16, 1959: "There are words that rhyme but are never used together. You would never use lute with boot!! Apropos of nothing. It's my reaction to drudgery—..." appears in Zukofsky's poem, "Her Face The Book Of—Love Delights In—Praises":

> Where She a breath
> Comes out of drudgery
> Notes a worked out knee deck her daisies
> And apropos of nothing
> 'There are words that rhyme but
> are never used together
> You would never use *lute* with *boot*—
> So she has used them... .
>
> (*All*, p. 209)

Niedecker quotes a Zukofsky letter word for word:

> LZ's
> As you know mind
> aint what attracts me
> nor the wingspread
> of Renaissance man
> but what was sensed
> by them guys
> and their minds still carry
> that sensing
>
> (*Blue Chicory*, np.)

Especially in Niedecker's work, there is a substantial coincidence of style between her poems and letters—both forms derive their trenchancy from ellipsis and compression. The following two extracts from letters to Cid Corman[5] recall her minimal poems:

> Torrential rains, water rising at
> Fort, my husband's cucumbers & squash
> swimming. Depend on nothing.
>
> (September 14, 1965)

Soft air, today, about to rain, half the leaves
down.

Thank you again, friend—
(October 9, 1968)

In fact, Corman rewrote in verse lines a passage from her letter of February 11, 1965. He called it "Niedecker Weather":

"Well—Milwaukee had
eleven and one
half inches of snow

but no rain. The piles
at street corners are
turning black. Ruskin

would have perished here,
but then, poor man, he
perished anyhow."

[*Origin*, ser. 3, 2 (July, 1966)]

Niedecker's correspondence with friends, and in particular with Zukofsky, is an essential adjunct to critical discussion of her poetic technique. In letters she found models for the scale, voice, and diction of her poems. They are chatty and companionable; they never declaim. Her comment in a letter to Corman confirms this observation, "Poems are for one person to another, spoken thus, or read silently" (May 3, 1967). In another letter to Corman she quotes from Kenneth Cox's[6] letter to her, "I only try to fit together things I do know ... Your enthusiasm for [William] Morris, for example ... And your love of letters: the delightful, deshabille style, talking to someone, not just talking" (Niedecker to Corman, May 15, 1969). This is all that survives of the letter. His praise, surely, extends both to her letters and her poems and makes the association between the two forms. Especially between friends, the language of letters is intimate, unstudied *talk*—co-respondence. And it was that companionable talk that Niedecker felt would be betrayed if Clayton Eshleman[7] were to publish her few letters to him:

No no no!—please do not print my letters. I was just feeling my way, interweaving—but I do not want to be known by what I say outside

poems—I don't have poets personally so here was a chance to see you thru letters that would stay just between you and me.

(February 20, 1968)

Like letters, her poems themselves are communications. She wrote to Cid Corman in October, 1964: "I wish you and Louie and Celia and I could sit around a table. Otherwise, poetry has to do it ..."; and to Jonathan Williams on July 18, 1967: "I told Basil he, LZ and I would see each other around August in *Poetry*... ." Her poems are never the narcissistic statements that someone in her isolated position might have written and they have none of the arch self-pity of Emily Dickinson's lines:

This is my letter to the World
That did not write to Me—

Although the poems are personal, they don't insist on the novelty of her experience. They are directed towards another consciousness, another understanding. Before publication, she mailed them out to friends—initially to Zukofsky for his criticisms and then, in the case of the later work, to Cid Corman, Ian Hamilton Finlay, and Clayton Eshleman. George Oppen once addressed this subject of the scaled-down audience in a letter to Charles Tomlinson:

> I was troubled while working to know that I had no sense of an audience at all. Hardly a new complaint, of course. One imagines himself addressing his peers, I suppose—surely that might be the definition of "seriousness"? I would like, as you see, to convince myself that my pleasure in your response is not plain vanity but the pleasure of being heard, the pleasure of companionship, which seems more honorable.[8]

If letters explain the character of her style, they also provide insight into her writing habits: they are a compositional middle-ground. A letter to Zukofsky begins: "22 below zero—o a couple of mornings ago it was 38 below... . The other day when it was terribly windy I took a book down and through the space where it was came the cold wind!" (February 5, 1951). Six weeks later she finishes the poem, "February almost March bites the cold." Here are the first two lines:

February almost March bites the cold.
Take down a book, wind pours in. Frozen—

(*My Life By Water*, p. 70)

Indeed, many of her letters make revealing companion pieces to the poems. The following letter and postcard, for example, delineate the compositional method leading to the poem "I rose from marsh mud":

> Wish I had a couple weeks more at home. But I made the best of it. A little marshy, soggy piece west of the house that one could almost call the primordial swamp ... I cut grass there and planted willows, my eyes to the green ground so much that I can almost feel sea-water in my veins ... little things like algae, fine-haired weeds mixed with large-blade grass, and I think: Equisetum—little fern-like plants with hollow stems—imagine that!—if equisetum is its name—like the guy that found out he had spoken prose all his life. Lots of wild mint where I want to mow (with corn knife) but I wouldn't, such sweet little things. Everytime I go down there with the intention of mowing I come back without doing it—and I guess my little willows will grow anyhow. I took a walk down a long path beside tall willows out to where the hunters get into their boats for mud lake—thousands of willows shoulder high with reddish leaves toward the tops—I simply pulled 'em out by the roots and lugged 'em home for my own beginning of creation. I worked all yesterday at this and walked miles within a short space. BP went with me on one jaunt. We saw wild sweet peas (bluish purple and much smaller than tame ones) entwined around the tall grasses, the coolest, freshest looking thing. Yes, June is a good month for you to come some day ...
>
> (June 19, 1948)

---

Dear Zu:

Saturday I arose from my primordial mud with bits of algae, equisetum, etc. ... to attend an expensive church wedding. Whole of history went thru my head, a big step from algae to CHURCH (for some people there can be no procreation without the Church!)*, from cell division to the male sweating it out while the other collects International Sterling Silver and dons and takes off satins and continues to sweat to pay for 'em. The little slave girl bride and the worse slave, her husband.

The killdeer still sitting on the eggs. The much vaunted Instinct in nature may be going astray ....

* And International Sterling!

(Postcard, June 22, 1948)

I rose from marsh mud,
algae, equisetum, willows,
sweet green, noisy
birds and frogs

to see her wed in the rich
rich silence of the church,
the little white slave-girl
in her diamond fronds.

In aisle and arch
the satin secret collects.
United for life to serve
silver. Possessed.

(*My Life By Water*, p. 66)

The postcard condenses the letter and the poem condenses the postcard. Niedecker makes a poem out of the conjunction of two apparently distinct experiences. Writing to Clayton Eshleman she referred to her letter-writing as "just feeling my way, interweaving." The poem is the final stage of interwoven thought and language.

Here is an example of a poem written in 1962, expressing some of the anguish of her friendship with Harold Hein. She met him in 1960 and would have married him if he had been willing.

The men leave the car
to bring us green-white lilies
by woods
These men are our woods
yet I grieve

I'm swamp
as against a large pine-spread—
his clear No marriage
no marriage
friend

(*My Life By Water*, p. 87)

A letter to Zukofsky gives the background to this poem—both to its opening incident and to some of its associative thinking.

Are you lonesome?

I was yesterday when I got Harold's letter saying not coming out this week end. We had a talk last Sun. night, again he said no, he would never marry again. He intends as he told me a year ago to go to Calif. in 4 or five years from now and live with his brother and brother's family. But we both said we musn't lose each other as friends... .

Yes, Manitowish Waters—o what glorious country! ... Too windy and cold for Harold to go fishing so we drove miles and miles on those newly built hard-top roads thru endless woods, meeting maybe one car in three miles. We stopped in one place and our men rushed out to pick Calla of the Swamp or Water Arum for us—greenish-white lilies with heart-shaped leaves.

(July 2, 1960)

Her identification of herself (and womankind) with the swamp-lily was made somewhere between this letter and the poem. After seeing the letter, one realizes that those first narrative details in the poem recount very little of the original experience—they are *private* recollection, cues for the associative pattern that follows.

A later poem provides a fanciful portrait of the expert:

The Greatest Plumber
in all the town
from Montgomery Ward

rode a Cadillac carriage
by marriage
and visited my pump

A sensitive pump, said he—
It has at times
a proper balance

of water
air and
poetry

(*Blue Chicory*, np.)

The poem, of course, represents "a proper balance" of poetry and life. Here is an extract from her letter to Zukofsky:

> Mont. Ward man came and fixed pump—he couldn't have done better if he'd been 'the greatest plumber in all London' as Hunt's neighbors called the one that lived near 'em. A model now of silent perfection, that pump, between drawings of water. Greatest plumber poem finished, also one on pump.
>
> (November 18, 1962)

The poem takes liberties with facts but the facts themselves, so we learn from the letter, are the products of hyperbole. Niedecker responds to the spirit of Hunt's neighbors' exaggeration and to her own pleasure in the language and the mended pump. She delights in a capsule drama.

Through the mails, Niedecker became friends with—besides Zukofsky—Edward Dahlberg, Jonathan Williams, Cid Corman, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Kenneth Cox and others. But letters were an important part of her literary life in another sense too: she read avidly the collected letters of writers such as Emily Dickinson, Adams and Jefferson, Darwin, William Morris, Keats, Hopkins, Henry James, Van Gogh, Santayana, Yeats, D.H. Lawrence, Wallace Stevens, Herbert Read, and Edward Dahlberg. More than the form is borrowed from the letters she received or read in collections. She quotes words, phrases, even whole passages. She was drawn to the kind of autobiography which letters incidentally record. Letters offered her the contact with another that orthodox autobiography or biography which is directed at a dispersed, undefined readership, could not provide. Her poems are peopled with figures from her reading of letters, for example:

> Asa Gray wrote Increase Lapham:
> Pay particular attention
> to my pets, the grasses.
>
> (*My Life By Water*, p. 29)

Through letters she established friendships with poets she rarely found opportunity to see in person. She met Zukofsky no more than a dozen times, Jonathan Williams twice, Cid Corman and Basil Bunting only once. Books of collected letters provided further 'friendships' Bob Nero said of her in "Remembering Lorine": "Book characters and what they did in their book reality, were alive for her ...."[9] Niedecker told Jonathan Williams, in a letter of course, that "Poetry is the most important thing in my life" (January 10, 1957).[10] Letters take honourable second place.

NOTES

1. All of Niedecker's remaining letters to Zukofsky are housed at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. No further acknowledgment will be made in the text. Permission to quote all Niedecker material is given by Cid Corman, literary executor of her estate.

2. For a full description of the collection see Marcella Booth, *A Catalogue of the Louis Zukofsky Manuscript Collection* (Austin, Texas: Univ. of Texas Press, HRC, 1975).

3. In 1985 the Humanities Research Center (HRC), changed its name to the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (HRHRC).

4. It must be noted that Niedecker edited Zukofsky's letters at his insistence. Marcella Booth adopts an unwarranted critical tone: "Miss Niedecker has taken her scissors to the cards and letters ... and has cut them into strips of various sizes ..." (p. 242).

5. Lisa Pater Faranda, "'Between Your House and Mine': The Letters of Lorine Niedecker to Cid Corman, 1960 to 1970," diss., Iowa, 1984. This edition is the source of all the Niedecker-Corman letters I quote.

6. Kenneth Cox wrote the first published appraisal of her work for the *Cambridge Quarterly* (Spring, 1969). His preparations for the essay initiated the correspondence. Selections from her letters to him appear in *Lorine Niedecker: The Full Note* (Devon, England: Interim Press, 1983), ed., Peter Dent, pp. 36-42.

7. Niedecker's letters to Eshleman are held in the Fales Collection, Bobst Library, New York University.

8. Quoted by Tomlinson in his tribute to Zukofsky in *Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet*, ed. Carroll F. Terrell (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, Univ. of Maine at Orono, 1979), p. 82. Also in Charles Tomlinson, *Some Americans: A Personal Record* (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1981), p. 50.

9. "Remembering Lorine," *Truck*, 16 (Summer 1975), p. 140.

10. Niedecker's letters to Jonathan Williams are in the Jargon Press Archive in the Poetry/Rare Books Collection, State University of New York at

Buffalo. The letter is quoted by Robert Bertholf in his introduction to *From This Condensery: The Complete Writing of Lorine Niedecker* (Highlands, N.C.: The Jargon Society, 1985), p. xxvii.

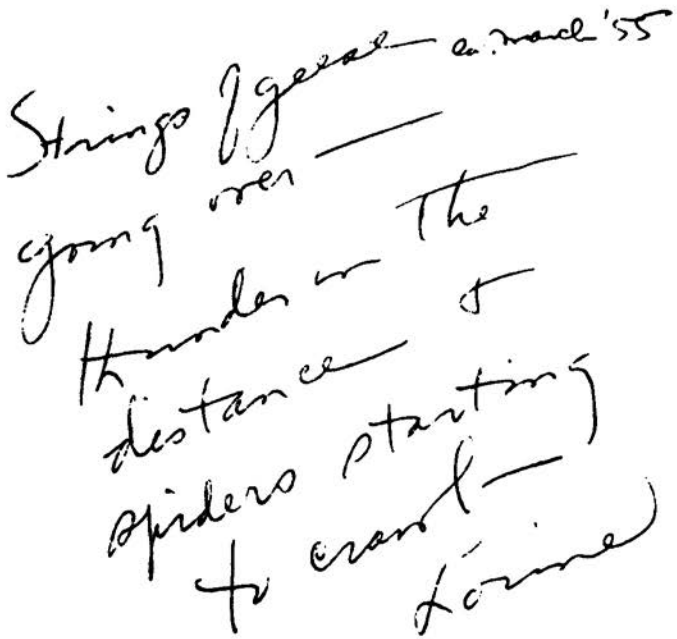
Was shoveling snow the other morning at 5:30 when big round moon was almost setting — just like night, bright moonlight & lovely [.]. I burn my trash ('waste' from food) on path to river (on a spot bare of snow. Nights I hang over the porch filling my small oil can to fill oil heater. I go to the folks for my drinking water as my own well water isn't clear yet — I'm not home enough to pump it to the stage fit for using. Drafty errands in beeky, sharp but fair — love it all. An egg froze for me in my bed on the porch but ate it anyway. A bit of life in the country, wot? How's your oil heater now? Why shd it refuse to work?

Undated, 1947

Northern water thrush in my back
Apr 27/54 yard. Last night, very warm, frogs
making the air jump, a whippoorwill
(over?) sounding that plaint for an hour
or so. (It must be much nearer to
get tired of your own song)

[] Louise

Dated, in Zukofsky's hand, 27 April 1954




Dated, in Zukofsky's hand, c. March 1955

# "SYNTAX EQUALS THE BODY STRUCTURE":

## bpNICHOL, IN CONVERSATION, WITH DAPHNE MARLATT AND GEORGE BOWERING

photo courtesy of University News Service

# "Syntax Equals the Body Structure": bpNichol, in Conversation, with Daphne Marlatt and George Bowering

Edited by Roy Miki

Excerpts from a panel discussion,
July 21, 1982
Simon Fraser University

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*During the summer of 1982, bpNichol was a special guest in a graduate course on Contemporary Canadian poetry.* The Martyrology *was on the course, and among other long poems, George Bowering's* Autobiology *and Daphne Marlatt's* Steveston. *Since both Bowering and Marlatt lived in Vancouver, they were invited to join bp to form a panel. In the morning, bp had given a reading of recently written work from* Martyrology Six. *The afternoon affair, convened in the pub seminar room, was loosely structured to allow for maximum interchange among the writers and between the writers and the class (which included some visitors). The edited portion of the discussion attempts to retrieve the threads of continuity without losing the texture of the conversation, though much, some two-thirds or more, was left behind on the tape—and given the disproportionate amount of speech recorded to text printed, I resorted to some splicing for the sake of form. Readers who would like to listen to the talk in all its raw entirety can do so in Special Collections, The Contemporary Literature Collection, in the Simon Fraser University Library, where the tapes are housed. The event was recorded by Kurtis Vanel, and I am very grateful to Susan Lord and Lisa Goldberg for doing the initial transcription for editing.*

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Roy Miki: After talking to bp, we thought we would begin this afternoon session by asking him a very simple, but perhaps profound question: how does such a long poem as the *Martyrology* begin, and why a title that refers to

"martyrs," an old term for figures that one would think had been largely laid to rest in the 20th century? George Bowering is here to talk about his writing in *Autobiology*, though of course he won't confine himself to this one text. Similarly, Daphne Marlatt has agreed to talk about her writing, and in particular about the composition of *Steveston*. Along the way, we'll also talk about variations on the extended form, the "long poem" as it's termed.

bpNichol: To begin with, I don't think anybody sets out to write a 15 year poem. I think I would have stopped if I thought it would take 15 years, because at the time I wouldn't have been able to encompass it. I was working on a series called *Scraptures*. The title was a sort of layered pun, obviously on "scraps of things," "scriptures," and "raptures." I started that little series with a concretization, a visual re-working of the opening line, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God," which James Reaney published in *Alphabet* magazine, a long long time ago. About the third or fourth of the series, David Aylward and I discovered these saints' names in "st" words in the English language. We were looking for a title for a poem by David about killing an asp—he was doing this series of "Asp" poems. He had taken the word "grasp" and had written it "asp arg," so we had this image of someone choking a snake. This is the way it is in the heady world of avant-garde poetics! Anyway, we both had this image as we were both looking at the word "stranglehold," and we both simultaneously saw "st. ranglehold," and thought that it was a marvelous discovery. That was about 1965 or 66, and that's sort of where it ended for David, but I began to see these "st" words as saints. Then I found that I began to address them—and I literally mean I found, I was not expecting this. I began to address these pretty rabid rhetorical pieces to the saints in *Scraptures*. I realized that these saints had, for me, taken on a meaning and a life; that is to say, they were more than merely puns.

When I started the *Martyrology* in the late fall of 67, I didn't know what I was starting. Really, the opening lines of the poem were, "december 67 / the undated poem is / found and forgotten," because I'd stumbled across this poem in a drawer that I could not remember writing, which is an experience you often have, you know: did I write that? I began out of that sense of trying, in that initial moment, of dealing with one's own history of a writing, that there are things you remember and things you don't. For me, the most problematic book is Book One. Originally *Monotones* was part of it, but I removed it and made it a kind of an unstated prologue. But I was dealing with the fact that I was writing the thing, and there was obviously a secret book in my mind that I had neither the technical control nor the life experience to get to. That was the idea behind those quotes [in Book One], you know, the sort of little background things. Their main purpose was to point to the fact that there was a larger thing going on that even I could apprehend at that point, and to suggest a larger

history that I hoped would make itself clear as I went along. So I just began, as I so often do in my writing. On the whole I find I am led by my ear, which is very similar to being led by your nose when you come right down to it; I mean you just track the thing and see where it takes you. I had no overall plan, other than that the structure was something that would evolve as I went along. In fact, that's been the way it's been.

RM: What about the title, *Martyrology*?

bp: A friend, Julia Keeler, who used to be a nun, was doing her Ph.D. thesis (I got to know her at the U. of Toronto library) on minor religious poets of the 1590s, and the minor religious poets were truly minor in the 1590s! One marvelous poem she and I both churtled over was called "The Martyrology of the Female Saints," which had some of the worst lines ever written in English language poetry, including the truly epic: "They cut off both her paps and thus ended her mishaps." [Laughter] It was a pretty heavy understatement given the circumstances! Anyway, through Julia I was introduced to that concept of a martyrology, simply the notion that it was a book in which you wrote out a history of the saints. And since, in a curious way, the saints were language, or were my encounter with language, the possibility of the journal form or the utanniki form also opened up—I was writing my history of the saints, my history of my encounter with language and so on. At times I thought it was a little too downbeat, as a title, so you get tempted to change it, but it still seems accurate.

RM: Could you explain utanniki as a form related to the Martyrology?

bp: The utanniki is a classical Japanese form of which Basho was really the first practitioner, with his *Records of a Weather-Exposed Skeleton* and other great titles. And probably the most famous example is Basho's *Narrow Road to the Deep North* and Issa's *The Year of My Life*. Essentially, what you get in the utanikki is a mixture of prose interrupted by poem, interrupted by prose, interrupted by poem, interrupted by prose, and that linkage goes on. Though that is obviously not precisely what happens in the *Martyrology*, what does happen is a constant formal interruption; that is to say, I'm dealing with form this way, then I'm dealing with form that way. I try to get very articulate when I'm revising, so I know what I'm doing when I revise, but in the moment of writing it's a much more subjective experience and my big check is: is the form evolving? If it isn't, I get worried and a bit suspicious that I've simply started to plug in, and that I've found a convenient form I can shove anything into, which is something I've tried to avoid doing.

George Bowering: Poe says that's the form of all long poems, like *Paradise Lost*. They're all prose interrupted by poetry.

bp: Great!

GB: There must be an essay in there somewhere.

bp: Yes, I sense it, at least worth an MA thesis!

GB: *Paradise Lost* and the *Martyrology*: A Comparative Study.

Jack Miller: bp, in the interview in *Outposts*, you mention that "syntax equals the body structure." Could you explain that statement, and George, could you expand on this by talking about *Autobiology*?

bp: I discovered—and this is what that statement comes out of—that emotionally and psychologically speaking we learn that we often armour the body, the easiest illustration of which is: if I live in a house with a low doorway, I'm probably going to end up walking like this a lot. [Hunching] I've seen tall people do this when they've lived in situations where the ceiling is low. You get an armouring of the body. I discovered that the order in which I wrote my poems allows certain contents in and keeps other contents out, i.e., the syntax I choose, the way I tend to structure a piece, form per se, permits some contents and excludes others. So what I was trying to find, because that is part of a larger thing I've been working towards, is a way to increase my own formal range (something I'm still trying to do), and therefore not merely be stuck, shall we say, by the physical limitation of my body at that point, i.e. just because I'm walking around with my shoulders up like this, if I can learn to relax I can see the world in a slightly different way and so on. If I can keep moving the structure of the poem around, hopefully I can encompass different realities and different ways of looking at things. In that sense, I've always seen a connection between the breathing I do and what comes out of me, the words I do, so syntax/body structure, sequence/body structure, but also the body of the poem. I don't know if that makes it clear or muddy, what I've just said. Muddy, eh? George, explicate that! [Laughter]

GB: *What bp was trying to say*—!! It's interesting, because I just stumbled across a piece I used in my class this year, that explained T.S. Eliot and certain of the Imagists as people who replaced regular syntax with the syntax of the image. And you've replaced syntax of the image with syntax of the body.

bp: Something like that. In a way, it's an over-condensed statement; it's a conversational statement. I mean, were I to sit down and write that out, I'd probably take about 5 pages—and here I am, yet again, in conversation trying to explain it!

GB: Are synapses a part of the body, or are synapses something that happens between parts of the body? Your poems are built on synapse, right? They live or die on synapse. I don't know, is synapse a thing or the name of an action?

bp: It happens between ganglias!

GB: *Ganglia* hasn't come out for a long time!

bp: *Ganglia* stopped publication in 1966.

GB: Well, it's easy to figure out what body and *Autobiology* have to do with one another. Again, in terms of anecdote, it was when I started writing with a pen instead of the typewriter—I've written with a pen ever since—and that happened because the first piece was written in a kitchen in an Irish working-class portion of London, England where I didn't have a typewriter. I wrote the first chapter of it there, then didn't write any more until I came back home to Montreal and for some reason, I can't remember, took up the poem. There was a happy coincidence between the manner of composition with a pen—it was also written in prose—and the subject matter. Both came together and became the definition of the other, or the extension of the other one.

bp: The only other thing I'd say about that too—when I initially wrote, I was trying to notate my voice as it happened, which is the same, get the syntax down to notate the body, breathing. But then I reached the point where I was able to take the notation and challenge myself with it, as when I do ve-ry or vo-cab-u-lary. Of course, if I walked around talking like that, I'd sound like an idiot. But I can get it to create a very particular sound effect. I can then start to use syntax and, by extension, notation, to push and challenge me in my reading, and to extend the range of the sound that's possible in a piece too. So partly that statement comes out of ruminating about all of that.

JM: Does punctuation fit into this somehow? I was thinking specifically of some of the poems in George's *Autobiology*. Some are punctuated fairly carefully and some have an absence of punctuation.

GB: I think they're all badly punctuated in terms of the logical realist punctuation that you pick up in grade 6!

JM: But why in some and not in others?

GB: The same reason why a lot of things happened with barrie, I was reading Gertrude Stein at the time, but it was probably also related to the fact that I was away from the typewriter for the first time and the involvement with actually seeing words spilling out of a pen—see, the typewriter reifies what the linguists tell us: that every piece of punctuation is absolutely equal to every other little piece of information, i.e. there's a key for it, so when you're typing on a typewriter, it's normal to keep punctuation clear. It's just as much work to make a dash as it is to make a comma, and to make an "n," but when you write with a pen, you can't get the words down as fast, so that information which doesn't go clack when you touch the key just disappears. That's part of it. The other part is that it's true that a lot of punctuation is spoken by the body; I mean, you can hear commas and so forth, but the body was a given in that instance, that's to say, this was really happening, so with that as a given, then the other one wants to float. That's not a logical answer, but it's the answer. Whereas with a typewriter, I think it's really true, what Olson was hinting at, that you can almost bypass the body when you're composing on the typewriter, that it's the brain just using part of the body to get out onto the page—or the mind does perhaps, and that's communal, rather than singular.

Daphne Marlatt: I always compose on a typewriter, and I don't feel that the body isn't there. In fact, I find that there's a kind of rush possible on the typewriter—because you can type that fast—that equates very definitely with certain body states.

GB: My mind's faster than my body.

DM: Well ... yes, but I'm thinking of *Steveston*, and I'm thinking that what I was working with in *Steveston* was very much an orgasmic feeling of trying to gather up everything and move it out—right out to the mouth of the river. I mean, the syntax and body and landscape become totally interwoven. And *Steveston* was all composed on the typewriter. I took handwritten notes while I was down there, but when I came to actually compose, it was on the typewriter.

GB: But *Steveston* partakes of your habit of trying not to get it said—well, filling the poem with parentheses, second thoughts, and the thought that breaks to qualify and so forth.

DM: Well, I wasn't trying not to get it said. I was trying not to arrive at the period. It was trying not to arrive at the end!

GB: It's a backwater coming into the language.

DM: The end of the poem is both what is desired and what you don't want to have happen. Barrie talks about that all the time.

RM: Was the composition of *Steveston* fairly all-consuming for you when you were doing it? Was there any kind of compositional rhythm, as the sequences formed?

DM: There was a rhythm in terms of the trips. I'd go down to Steveston about once or twice a week and I'd take notes in a little notebook. It was very much of a collaboration, because I would often go down with Robert Minden, who was doing the photographs, and we would talk on the way back about what each of us had experienced. And I would avoid sitting at the typewriter that day. I would wait till the next morning, because morning is always the best time for me, and roll in a blank piece of paper and see what came up! That was the immediate compositional rhythm.

RM: Did you have any sense of closure as it was being written? The first poem is definitely a beginning ("Imagine a town"), and the last has a strong emphasis on circles, cycles, completion, beginnings and ends.

GB: But the pieces are not published in the order you wrote them.

DM: No, they're not, and moreover, I didn't think I was writing a long poem. I just thought I was writing a sequence of poems about this place *Steveston*, and I was rather shocked when Michael Ondaatje suggested that *Steveston* is a long poem.

RM: What's the difference between a sequence and a long poem? At what point do sequences become "long," which seems to be an over-riding term. Certain things are discrete units, and as you begin talking about a transformation in which all these discrete particles become part of a larger frame, or larger space, there's suddenly a leap to "long."

DM: Well, yes, you see, I think a long poem builds on itself, and I didn't have any sense that Steveston was building on itself. It was more like something was there that each poem was a stab at, was an attempt to verbalize, or articulate.

bp: You thought of it more as a book than as a long poem.

DM: Yes, I thought of it as a book, as a single experience really.

bp: At this point, in a way we don't have the terminology or the terms to talk about the differences between different types of longer structures.

RM: Robin Blaser's sense of serial poem, as I understand it, is the sense of going into a dark room. The lights go on in a single poem of the series, and then go off at the end. There seems to be a de-emphasis upon memory. Every piece in the sequence does not pick up the memory of the previous ones. The poet goes into the dark room for each one, and the narrative evolves out of that movement. But bp's sense of accumulation in his compositional method suggests a process analogous to that of cell-division where nothing is finally ever lost and where memory is important. All of the past is always coming into the present not to determine but to condition the way the present will go in the composition. The poem, then, begins to accumulate a history, which is that point I think that the *Martyrology* can be seen as a long poem. I'm thinking of history in that really literal sense of quantifying time. Of course, a serial poem can be a long poem too, so there are variations of what we call the "long poem" and these require more attention.

DM: You're speaking of the history of itself?

bp: Yes, of the writing. In that sense, there's obviously a big difference between *Steveston* and Michael Ondaatje's *Billy the Kid*, which you can see as vaguely similar types of structures, and *Allophanes* which has a "long" structure.

RM: George, do you think of *Autobiology* and *Allophanes* as sequences, as serials, or how would you describe them?

GB: I tend to think of those two, especially *Allophanes*, as something like a serial poem. *Allophanes* is filled with self-forgetting when it comes time for composing the poem—that you self-forget in order to hear the voice, or in that case voices, that are speaking the poems. And each one clearly has it own integrity, and you don't consciously say: Okay, there are 3 lines of development going on in this poem, and now I have to work each of them to an independent and then a dependent climax, or something like that, what you would get in one of Frost's dramatic, extended poems. The rule that I held for a lot of my poems starting with *Autobiology* was that when I became aware of what the poem was repeating, or what it was concerned with—in that case the intelligence of the body—as soon as I thought of a case or an example that would fit, I would discard that idea entirely. [Laughs] The same thing worked with Part Two,

*Curious*, the poem about the poets. There were some poets I wanted to be in there, and some poets I didn't want are in there and some of the ones I wanted are not in there, because I already said, "Oh, I know, I'll stick so-and-so in there." The act of composition was an urge, but there was nothing outlined for it, and as soon as something became outlined for it I just chucked it out.

DM: Did you have any sense of connection or none between one individual piece and the next?

GB: Well, I would remember lines. The longer the poem gets—my novels are written the same way—the voice that's speaking to you has various sources and eventually one of the sources will be the poem because it's got so much body to it. So in *Autobiology* I begin to hear the poem which I have not looked at, and certain lines come up over and over again, I guess images too, but more lines or sequences of written words.

Barry Maxwell: The order the pieces were published in *Autobiology*, is that the order you wrote them in?

GB: Absolutely, and the typesetting goes exactly according to what happened on the page, although they're written in prose. When it was first typeset, not in the Vancouver Community Press version but in the McClelland and Stewart version, they typeset it to make its lines end where the typewritten Vancouver Community Press lines ended, so that it was really skinny and all wrong, and when they sent out sheets to be reviewed, everybody thought it was verse. Somebody reviewed it in *Books in Canada* and said it was really terrible verse. After I complained, it was changed for the final publication. But no, the order was exactly as written, so much so that I didn't even know that there's two chapters called "The Breaks" about broken bones. When I wrote the second one I guess I had totally forgotten that I had written another one about broken bones. When I came later to read the poems several months after the first draft was made, I was really surprised to find that I had two chapters with the same name. Since that time, I've never varied from that method.

RM: George, how important was the writing of *Autobiology* for you?

GB: It was really important ... well, it's not important at all in the world, but in my experience it was important, because it got me back to writing with the hand, it got me writing prose, and it got me out of the lyric.

bp: Well, you absorbed your Stein influence at that point.

GB: Yes, in terms of how it caused other writings of mine to happen, it's probably the most important book.

RM: And the breakdown of division between reading and writing that occurs really makes reading a foregrounded experience in that book.

GB: Funny, the writing should be reading that's difficult to follow, because of the punctuation, but it's apparently easy to follow, because of the punctuation. Strange.

DM: The voice is so strong in it, I don't think the punctuation matters.

GB: Very self-reflexive, is what it is.

bp: Wyndham Lewis would have called it the naive voice.

GB: I tend to think of it as the demotic voice. [Laughs]

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Juliet McLaren: Daphne, you said *Steveston* was rearranged. How? What did that do to it?

DM: I wrote it ten years ago, so I'm trying to remember. It seemed to me that the form I was interested in wasn't linear but cyclical. I guess an example would be something like what you do with a kaleidoscope when you turn it and the bits make this ring. Well, that's due to the reflection of the mirrors, but it makes a circular form. And that thing in the middle, which is the unspoken, which is what each of the pieces is working towards, still exists in the centre as that unspoken. So what I tried to do was arrange the poems in a way that would respect that. Now, it had an obvious beginning piece because that entrance piece is very initiatory, and then it had an obvious conclusion. But the conclusion—and I wrote it as a conclusive piece—was really an attempt to recreate the cycle all over again. I don't remember how I ordered the pieces in the middle. I don't remember what the principle was for ordering.

GB: What about the other *Steveston* poems; were they written at a different time?

DM: There were three others, written at the same time. One was published in *Sound Heritage* [Vol. 4, No. 2], a piece I felt really belonged to the whole

*Steveston* experience, but I couldn't get it right until after the book was put together, so it never appeared as part of the book. The others were sketchier.

GB: But you could have stuck it in when Michael Ondaatje did the *Long Poem Anthology*.

DM: Yes, I know, but then I would have had the problem of trying to figure out where it fitted, its proper place.

GB: So you were saying, no, it doesn't go in there after all.

DM: I still think of it as belonging, but in some more tangible way. And the first *Steveston* series, which appeared in the women's issue of *I's*, was another sequence all of its own, not really about *Steveston*. I started it about *Steveston*, but it turned out to be about Vancouver's skid row.

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Irene Niechoda: bp, I have a question about space in the *Martyrology*. In Books One and Two, almost consistently, you've got a page that's silent, and then there's talking. Then, all of a sudden Book Four just talks! In the Coach House book, that's sliced away, and they've left out the illustrations and everything's just put on the page and it doesn't work as well—

bp: That's just so I'll see how they'll anthologize it after I'm dead!!

IN: I want to know how the silence works with the talking and the illustrations, and the clouds. I also want to know the difference between your use of the clouds in there and your use of the rectangular illustrations on the right hand side of the page?

bp: Right, you don't want to know much, do you? [Laughs] Okay, let me get something out of my mind first, so I can answer your question. I'm still thinking of this syntax thing, which I'd forgotten I'd said. I don't know that I agree with it anymore, the more I think about it. I mean, I agree with the notion I was dealing with, that breathing's an extension of your body structure, and when you're trying to notate your breath, what you're going to get is the syntax of your body. That's what I was saying. But subsequent to that interview, I would say I focused more on learning how to move the line around differently and using notation. In short, it's not an absolute. It was kind of a stab of thought at that time.

When I talked about the formal evolution of the work, that's partly what I'm talking about. Book One deals with, really, each poem occupying its own page. In Book Two the first two sections—"The Book of Common Prayer" and "Clouds"—are that way, but then I began to run the poems over the pages. In terms of the work, that meant the lines were coming at you much more quickly. I take spatial notation as being significant, so those page pauses [in Books One and Two] are full pauses between poems. Whereas when I'm doing them one after the other—like, there's this poem, a little cloud, then this poem—the cloud was just in lieu of using the typographic bullet or the little empty box, or the squig of a man holding a fish in his hand, or whatever you're going to use to separate poems. I thought, why not use clouds, since that was the saints' home. Those were all hand-drawn by Libby at Coach House.

So in Book Three I was dealing with information coming at me much more rapidly. And also, of course, in Book One and in Book Two you're dealing with titled sections, "Friends as Footnotes," "Sons and Divinations." In Book Three I moved away from the title, i.e. implying that what I began to do then was to say, these are becoming less and less discrete sections and more and more they're moving toward being one unit; except that there are a few named sections—the interludes are named. By Book Four, I threw out the idea of section titles entirely. Book Four is really one long poem. It's very interesting how, when you're writing the long poem, the fact that it's happening for you in discrete sections is very nice. It means that even though you're writing the open-ended long poem, you've got this experience of closure, so you can take a deep breath. But in Book Four there was really no room for the deep breath, so that even though it took me a year to write Book Four, it's like being in a constant state of agitation, in a curious way. That was part of the formal evolution.

What happens in Book Five—which is coming out, quick plug, "this fall," he said—is that I begin to deal with chains of thought. I try and track a phenomenon that happens to me, not that frequently, but sometimes you're writing along and suddenly two lines occur to you. This line could go here, or it could go this way; in Book Five I start to write both of them. That became the chains—the writing would branch and this gave you a choice of reading paths. Then what happened as a result of that was, in a way, I'd be writing in a notebook and thinking, what was the last part, well here, okay, continue on from there ... so it's like Book Four in that it's continuous, except that the narrative thread is all over the place. So I began to try and deal with the decentralized narrative. That is, can you have narrative and at the same time decentralize it? Can you "tell the story" and not be sequential? From my experience with Book Five, I think the answer is yes! What you have are twelve different chains. You begin at one point, but really it means that any reader is going to have a different experience of that book. No two readers are necessarily going to have exactly the same experience with that book—which is true

anyway, because every reader comes to a text from a completely different associational base, so what they're bringing to the experience is so radically different from what another reader brings. The chains highlight that reality of the reading act.

Now what's happening in Book Six—I didn't even recognize Book Six when it started, and this has been constantly true for me in the *Martyrology*, which is why you frequently read published statements by me saying the *Martyrology* is now finished. I think it's over and then I realize it's still going on. Fred Wah says I should just shut up and keep writing. A nice combination of thoughts! In Book Six, the writing began to break apart into discrete books, which are really an extension of the chains, the one I branched into twelve chains. In a way there's an implication that any one of those can go in different directions. And that's kind of what happens in Book Six with what I was reading today, the four books that have emerged so far, two of which are finished and two of which aren't.

So that's a kind of a take on the formal evolution of the *Martyrology* that I was talking about. What's always an utter surprise for me is where the form ends up going. Partly it grows obviously out of my own creative dissatisfaction—for example, the middle of Book Three, I got really fed up because it seemed that its structure was like nineteenth century classical music. It was borrowing from symphonic structure. I don't even like nineteenth century classical music, so where was I getting this from? Well, I was getting it through Pound and some of the long poems I'd read, which were using classical musical structures. What I wanted was a sound that was more, to my point of view, contemporary. I wanted, you know, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, I want Ornette Coleman, I wanted M. Kagel, that sort of thing. That's really what pushed me to try to get away from the long, sonorous line I was using in Book Three which kind of reaches a real crescendo there, and then in Book Four it just breaks apart completely.

IN: Yes, it's great. Book Four has got more energy than the other books.

bp: Well, it doesn't feel as ponderous, for sure.

IN: And I guess you're playing with the change in the page colouration and the disappearance of the frames?

bp: Absolutely, that's because my final step of composition is the page. Once I've written the whole thing, which is just written long hand and then typed up and so on and so on, then I get the page proofs. That's when I have to deal with the reality of, here's the form I've chosen, and this is part of the form I've chosen, this machine, so I have to deal with this frame. And even though it's a

long poem, you're dealing with this unit. One of the things that's never really been decided in open verse notation is what happens at the bottom of a page. Does it break in the middle of the stanza, as in prose? Do you just ignore it? Well, I can't ignore it—that's my problem. To me it's a significant break. If the poem breaks there, I have to deal with it. I have to shuffle the poem around to get it to work. Now, because I'm dealing at such length with the poem, in a way I have more choice than the person who's written one tight little poem where every word is precise. I have a lot of compositional choices, just because of the length of the structure I'm working with. In that way I have more freedom, to move.

IN: What about the top of the page, though? Even in Book Four sometimes you start this far down, sometimes you start farther down, and I still take that as a pause—I read that as a pause in sound, but then some of them change. Is that a difference in actual time?

bp: No, that's sloppiness in layout. They should all start on the same line. That a typographic invention, really. That would have been the advange of using a bullet. They just didn't know how big or small those clouds were going to be. It's just like in real life, the weather's unpredictable.

RM: The book as a form then becomes a limit that has to be taken into account in the compositional process?

bp: You don't in music, but then you've got the stave within the page, which I don't have—or in essence the page is a single stave that I have to deal with, when I'm composing. I've become really conscious of this with Book Five, literally, my final stage of rewrite is when I get the page proofs.

RM: What would McClelland and Stewart do?

bp: I wouldn't publish with them! They think they're really going the distance if they give you a choice of two typefaces! They've really busted their hump for you as an author—"Hey, this stuff's not going to sell anyway!"

RM: Daphne, are you conscious of the book in the sense that bp's talking about, that a page is only so big and people literally have to turn the page so that there's always something hidden now?

DM: It's interesting, I am when I'm writing in short lines. I tend not to write poems that go beyond a page. Sometimes they're a lot shorter than a page. It's always a huge leap to put in a new piece of paper. But I don't feel that way

when I'm using a long line, as in *Steveston*, or when I'm writing prose. And that has something to do with the momentum—the momentum just runs right over the edge of the page.

bp: Of course, there are clearer typographic conventions in prose. In prose, we have learned to ignore the page. The ideal prose notation will be the long, continuous line—ladadadadada—they're reading bytes of information, but there is actually no convention around it in poetry. It's a problem we haven't solved yet notationally.

Shelley Wong: I want to ask Daphne specifically about this matter of space. I asked you once before and you said that in the Talonbooks edition, in terms of starting in the middle of the page, the decision was arrived at by you and the designer Dwight Gardiner.

DM: Yes, and that was because here you actually do have a non-standard, non-8 1/2 by 11 piece of paper which is bound with a bunch of other pieces of paper, so all of a sudden that gives you more possibilities, but like barrie I didn't compose thinking that I would begin half way down the page. It's a decision that gets made after the thing's written and you suddenly have a design editor who's willing to play around.

SW: How did you arrive at that decision to start half way down the page?

DM: Because of the space. I really wanted a lot of white space around the print.

SW: What was the white space doing?

DM: It was for the language to resonate in, and it had something to do with the photographs also. It was a way of giving non-verbal background to the language which was not contained, or containable, in a page as the photos were.

* * *

bp: It's very interesting, when Phyllis Webb's book *Naked Poems* was published orginally, I remember there was an outrage in lots of reviews at how much white space she left on the page. People were saying, what a waste of paper! And they didn't mean that the poem was bad; they were really outraged that she wouldn't squeeze it up.

GB: They were complaining how much you had to pay per word to buy the book!

bp: But I think it's precisely with that white space—that's how you suddenly read silence at that point. You know, the word space suddenly magnifies. You're really aware of that white space all the time, but you never foreground it. But when you suddenly leave a lot of white space, you foreground it and it always affects readers, whether they register it consciously or just as a kind of subliminal hit. Their eyes turn the page, and they're looking for type at the top and it's not there. Drop. Which is why, Daphne, you're saying that you read that as significant space. It is significant space. That's why you've got to be careful that your designers do it right.

DM: It was also part of the contradictions of that book, because there's a lot of stillness in Robert's photographs. They're very still photos, and there's a lot of movement in my language. The white space had something to do with mediating that difference, I think.

The business about white space is interesting for another reason. The photos are framed by the white space surrounding them, and I think this also happens with single-page shortline poems—it's very visual, the arrangement on the page, as barrie was saying—but I think something else is at work with the longline poems, something that has more to do with "background" (to use a visual metaphor) or silence (an acoustic one) to intervene between the verbal rushes the poems are. A river, in flood, keeps on rushing, no pauses, no breaks, but I suppose I felt the poems couldn't do that because, besides exhausting a listener, that would suggest something that didn't happen in the composition. They came in discrete rushes, not as one prolonged flood.

* * *

Carol Lane: About voice in your writing, Daphne, I was interested when you said that you composed on the typewriter, because I have a sense of both this incredible rush, and also of a breathlessness, like these breathing pauses. Does the typewriter help that, because it can keep up?

DM: Yes, the breathing pauses punctuate the rush, and so prolong it. And the typewriter invites you to go out to the very end of the possible margin. That had a lot to do with it, because I was coming from very short line poems. The poems in *Leaf/leafs* are very short, sometimes just one syllable, and words are dropping over the line break, in half. It was a high to suddenly say, the line's going to be as long as the page is wide. So there's what I think of as a really prose urge to push always to the end and yet to forestall arriving at it. That fascination with syntax, where you don't think about it but it arrives; you find yourself in situations, and then you respond in the moment, but the situations

are syntactic situations: how do I get out of this one? I'm not ready for a period yet.

* * *

RM: What about the use of the first, second and third person voice in writing?

GB: I write in the third person for the reader, who is me. I guess it's complicated but it's simple in one sense—so that you can't express yourself, and so you can have that experience you have as a reader. If it's written in the third person, you and the composer are looking perhaps at the same angle at the thing, with a little parallax; whereas, if it's written in the first person—

bp: Don't look at me, I write in the first person!

GB: —the reader is made into a second person who is being spoken to, and therefore distanced. That's part of it, and the other part of it probably has to do with puritanism. But you see what I mean. If you're reading, "He did this and he did that ...," you and the writer can maybe even fill the same space.

bp: I write in the first person partly because one of the goals I set for myself when I was 18 or 20 was to find a way to write about completely emotionally loaded material without sentimentalizing it, without "romanticizing" it, and without melodramatizing it. And when I say "romanticizing," I probably mean melodramatizing. Which is harder to do in the first person. I also like the "I." I think you need it in terms of the "we," to articulate that. I'm not a reader who necessarily feels distanced by the "I," either. I find that as the "I" goes on, I start to identify with the "I" if it's speaking in ways I feel some kinship with. To me, that's not necessarily my reading experience, so that could be a subjective reading experience on George's part.

GB: It's not subjective!

bp: Pardon me, on his part; it's not logical, but it's definitely psycho-logical. You get a different effect with the third person, but that's partly the fashion of the times, you know. For instance, Stein's notion of the continuous present, the i-n-g verb, still tends to be unfashionable. We prefer the still photo, the "ed" ending, we prefer it framed. "I shot the picture," as opposed to "I am shooting the picture," frames it, finishes it off, and you move on discretely; whereas in that continuous present, there is no closure. I've heard people in writing classes say, "Never use 'ing' verbs." What a weird statement. What they really mean is they don't like the sound; they don't like that feeling of non-closure. Or they'll

say, "no confessional poetry to magazines." Now Sylvia Plath has got to be one of the big hits of the century, right? Would we call this confessional poetry, or would we call this confessional poetry?

GB: Yes, I was going to say a little while ago that you use the "I" because the *Martyrology* is a kind of confessional autobiography.

bp: Yes, but it's also dealing with the notion of journal. All I'm saying is that you get fashions of the moment that don't necessarily relate to the problems of dealing with the word "I" or the word "he." I mean, it's a different problem to write in the "he"; it can be very difficult to write in the third person impersonal. It can be as tricky for a person to do it as when he writes in the first person. In fact, for some people, when you can tell they can't control the "I"—if you can't control the "I" in your writing, the trick is to write in the "he" or the "she." Then you'll get control of the "I." That's the way you get it.

Rob Dunham: George, what would have happened if you had sat down and started to write "Old Standards" [in *Particular Accidents*] in the first person?

GB: I think I wouldn't trust it. Actually, it's really funny, because I'm writing (as I keep saying I'm not) the beginning of a long poem now, and yesterday I wrote five lines to it, and I'd been trying to write it in the third person. That had worked before, because before that I was writing in the third person in order not to write at the second person. Now, I said, okay I'm going to write in the first person plural to try to write in the first person, and it wouldn't work at all, so I slipped into first person singular, but I made a mental note to come back to that stanza and change it, I don't know how but I'm going to change it—because, immediately I find myself saying, oh! I'm writing in the first person, that means I get to say whatever I want.

bp: So for George, "I" means the license to kill!

GB: When you write "I," I reach for my gun!

RD: When you write "I," you're going to be writing for the next fifteen years.

GB: Ah, but look how the "I" has changed. You've got a totally different "I" now, writing "A Phoenix Too Frequent" Six rather than One. It's a different "I."

bp: That was Steve McCaffery's nickname for the *Martyrology*. When I kept saying it was over, he called it "A Phoenix Too Frequent" Six.

GB: Your first person has almost become for you a third person now.

DM: No, I think that's an important thing, what both of you are touching on. Because the "I" fundamentally has no limits. It can eat up the whole world. And the "he" or the "she" is out there in the landscape. That's part of the difference. It's a limitation.

bp: All of the tons of George's literary essays are in the "I," right? "I, George Bowering was down at the Cubs game eating a bunch of peanuts and drinking beer, when I found myself thinking of Hesiod" ... a typical opening line.

GB: Right, right.

DM: So what is this? Some kind of weird inversion happening?

bp: Most of us would write our essays in the third person. George just likes to flip things around.

RD: The "West Window" poem [in *The Catch*] is in the first person, isn't it? What happened there? [Laughter]

GB: But it's not about my observations. It's about other things that happened, plus it's an imitation of Wordsworth and Keats and other poets, so it's not my "I" exactly.

bp: He's got it tightly rationalized!

GB: No, I just realized—one just realized that! My conversation is in the third person.

DM: That's interesting, because what you've said, George, is that for you, the "I" is a persona whereas for most people the "he" or the "she" is the persona.

bp: And in fact, Daphne, as you were saying earlier, the trick, when writing in the "I," is to find out what the limits are. Getting control of the "I" in your writing is to realize you can't devour the world. You can start here, and you might get as far as there, before you've died of botulism, or something. You just can't do it. That's part of getting control of it, because if it simply becomes an exercise in megalomania, it's bad writing.

* * *

IN: I have a question for bp. Talking about first and third person, what happens when you use the first person "I" followed by a third person verb?

bp: As in?

IN: I have one example here—I know there are more—"I is inside."

bp: Well, often when I'm talking about "I," I'm talking about the "I," that is to to say, your I, his I, her I, my I, so on.

IN: As opposed to the "we"?

bp: Or as opposed to the "he". I'm trying to deal with that. See, to me, pronouns are more universal, that's why I like them. I think it's harder for a general reader to identify with an "I," I would agree, but I think that we get into that eventually. He, she, we—it's looser, it isn't named. Naming, though on the one hand it claims, often distances. So in trying to deal with the reality of how we perceive and so on, I often prefer to use pronouns. In those cases, that shift to the third person verb is to indicate that type of usage of the word "I." "I" is an interiorized concept—in short, "I" is inside.

RD: George, I was just thinking about what happens with your third person. Though you say you don't trust the first person because it allows too much subjectivity, there's something very affective about your third person. It has an elegaic quality.

GB: Yes, I'd say that's true. My novel [*Burning Water*] is probably the best way to talk about that because there's an understood "I" who's another George, in other words, Bowering in that text writing the whole thing about "he" or "him." Any time you write, there's an understood "I." So if you're talking in the first person presumably either those two I's collapse or there are two distinct "I"s, one ironically beholding the other one, I guess. You might be right to say elegaic, because there's probably the feeling I'm generally after when it comes to writing. Unlike barrie, I tend to write about something that did happen rather than something that's happening right now. That's a difference between you and me, and might easily be why I go for the "he". You cannot be elegaic with the first person, can you? The other person will say, "Go cry on someone else's shoulder," or, "You may feel a sense of world smear about this, but I don't." In a sense, I'm trying to seduce the reader who says, "Oh well, if you're saying that about him rather than about yourself, then it must be more true."

* * *

Valerie Rodd: bp, I was wondering whether you have the same sense Daphne does about pulling things with you through your *Martyrology*, and possibly not wanting to end the poem as well.

bp: Yes, there's a real ambiguity about it. I mean, on the one hand, I love and embrace the fact that it doesn't end. On the other hand, I do keep issuing these statements saying it's over. As a totally subjective experience, I find writing to be a tension between the sheer delight of writing and kind of an almost unbearable agony about the fact that it's still going on. Both things are true at the same time, you know.

VR: Can you relate that to this whole problem with the I, and the use of the first, second and third person? I think there's something you're going to confront at the end of the poem—

bp: In a way, it's also one of the things I've written about, and I'm consciously trying to fight. It's what I call the immortality game. It was a great experience working at the U of T Library. As you'd go through the poetry sections, there would be literally hundreds and thousands of volumes of stuff that you'll never get around to reading. It teaches you a certain amount of humility. How many of us have really heard of Bertha M.C. Shaw, author of one of my favourite inadvertantly bad titles, "Just Kneel Down on the Good Ground and Kiss It for Me: Request Made to a Soldier on Leave," same wonderful author of "Ode to a Green Strawberry" and other classics.

GB: Published by Fiddlehead Books!

bp: Now, now! In a sense, then, it seemed to me that in a lot of classical structure what you get is a flight from mortality. You build the structure that will live beyond you. Obviously, you die and your works go on beyond you to some degree, assuming there's not some major catastrophe, but on the other hand, you take something like Ur (which is why I got into the whole Dilmun thing), we didn't even know about Dilmun until the tablets at Ur were discovered. I mean, that was literally a lost city. There was no other reference to it until they discovered the tablets containing the Gilgamesh legends, and that's in the 1880s. I had that line in the poem I was reading today, "finally all reference vanishes." So there's a notion of high art that I find impossible to believe in. It doesn't make sense to me. It seems to me that existence is more temporal than that. On the other hand, you're also writing this thing which could exist beyond you—hence that other line, this poem continues—"I die years before this poem can possibly end." When I say, the closure you're

talking about is death, I'm not being facetious. In that act of the thing, you're writing towards its end and its non-end.

GB: You shouldn't say that, barrie, because that means you're going to keep writing that poem till you die, and there'll be some critic in Ontario who'll find the obvious solution.

bp: I thought of that, George. I think I wrote about it somewhere. [Laughs]

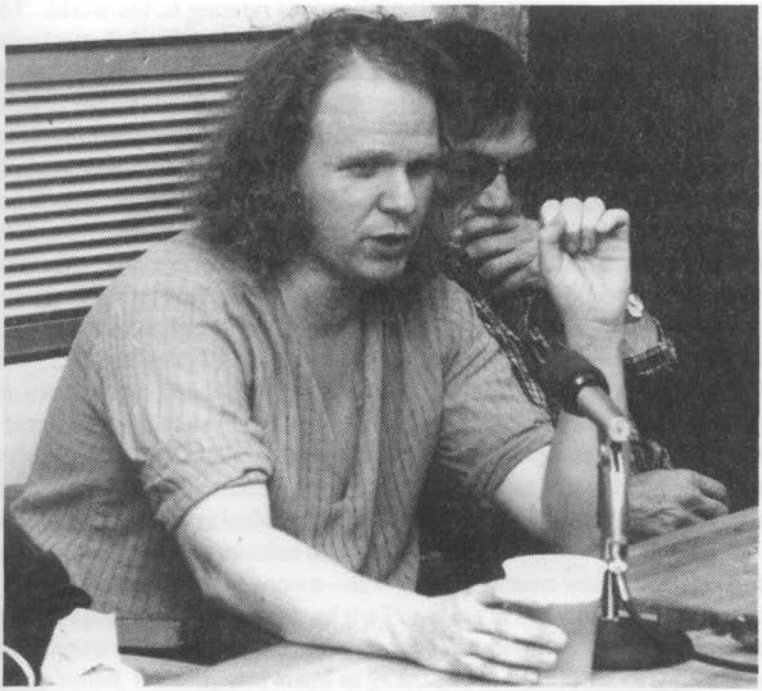

photo courtesy of University News Service

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RM: bp, how does technique relate to your sense of contemporary poetics? What's the larger meaning of the concern with the writing act, the placement of words on the page, and how a poem gets composed?

bp: I always liked what Philip Whalen wrote years ago in *New American Poetry*, that his work was a "graph of his mind moving." Well, when I'm talking about this thing of facility, of craft in the old sense, it seems to me you're talking about a connectedness, say a cultural connectedness. Then there's the history of our own writing, the history of the writers we have learned from, and the wider, broader history of writing. And there's that nice theoretical concept, all literature, which is something none of us could ever read.

Once you begin to realize all that, nonetheless, here you are in your writing, and writing, I think it's fair to say for all three of us, is the most meaningful activity. So in a way you have this bizarre relationship to the world—a rather solitary activity is your most meaningful way of relating to the world. To me, therefore, it seems a responsibility. A personal moral stance I then take on is to expand my technical range, my range of what is possible in my craft, to know that I don't write a certain way because I choose not to, not because I can't. It's very easy to dismiss a certain way of writing, but the fact is, you couldn't write that way to save your soul. I mean, if God promised you wouldn't go to Hell if, you couldn't do it. So it seems to me that you're engaged in the very human activity of trying, in the vocation you have chosen, to relate to existence—to try to do that in the best way that is absolutely possible.

GB: Or as Gertrude Stein said, If you can do it, why do it?

ROBERT HOGG

# MAXIMUS AT THE GATES: THE AMBIVALENT NATURE OF THE MOTHER-CITY

In "Maximus, from Dogtown—I" Olson, through the contest and transfiguration of James Merry, an historical resident of Dogtown, indicated the new direction the second volume of the *Maximus Poems* would take—away from the social concerns of Gloucester, Massachusetts, with its complex political and economic history, and toward an examination of the individual psyche. The shift from the port of Gloucester to the now deserted inland village of Dogtown signalled an increasing interest in the metaphorical nature of place, and of the poet's problematical relation to this spiritual aspect of his locale. The defeat of Maximus, as Merry, on his own ground symbolizes the difficulty Olson himself had taking up residence in this sacred precinct where primal gods—and not politicians—hold sway. Merry's tragic battle with the bull-calf is presided over by the intemperate goddess of the Mexican Pulque, Mayauel. At stake in this epic struggle is the emergence or suppression of the hero's soul, the clearly individuated ego. In drunken vanity, Merry fails, and the negative elementary character of the Mother continues supreme. It remains, therefore, for Maximus to transcend his metaphorical defeat (the *literal* death of Merry) and to prepare for a renewed attack on the feminine citadel.

In "Maximus, from Dowtown—II"[1] and the poems which closely follow it, the negative elementary character of the Feminine is more narrowly delineated by the archetypes of the *witch*, the *siren* and the *femme-fatale*. Though it is not expressly stated, these figures stand as guardians to the hidden or secret City which lies 'under' Dogtown, the Mother-City (or *metro-polis*) to which Maximus is magnetically drawn. There is to be found the "Black Gold Flower," the "Padma" or lotus of Creation—a prize loosely equated with the golden fleece sought by Jason and his Argonauts. Medea's ambivalent role as both helper and destroyer is early alluded to when she is introduced as "a Phoenician / wench ... Daughter // of the Terror." Here, it is to her aspect as Hecate, Moon-Witch, that Olson refers, for although she aids Jason and the Argonauts in their rescuing of the sacred golden fleece from the garden of Ares in Aea, she becomes associated in our minds with the "loathsome and immortal dragon of a thousand coils ... born from the blood of the monster Typhon,"[2] who guards it and whom Medea

subdues with magic incantations and "soporific drops" (*GM2*, 238). On their return voyage, Medea performs other remarkable feats, but her greatest act of calumny is reserved for Pelias who had unlawfully usurped the Iolcan throne from Jason's father, and contrived to send Jason on his impossible mission in the hope that he would not return; during Jason's absence Pelias killed his parents and younger brother. Medea undertakes to revenge Jason's losses by treachery; disguised as a crone of Artemis, she arrives in Iolcus proclaiming that Artemis had appeared "in a chariot drawn by flying serpents" and promised "good fortune" (*GM2*, 251) for the Iolcans. Frightened by this crone and her attendants dressed up as Maenads "raging through the streets," Pelias "enquires in terror what the goddess require[s] of him" (*GM2*, 251). Medea tells him that Artemis is about to reward his piety with new youth, and convinces Pelias that she can rejuvenate him if he will allow himself to be ritually cut to pieces and cooked in her magic cauldron. Ironically, it is two of his daughters who perform the ritual, only to discover afterwards that they have committed patricide. In a footnote, Graves associates Artemis's chariot with Medea's: "Medea's serpent-drawn chariot—serpents are underworld creatures—had wings because she was both earth-goddess and moon-goddess. She appears in triad here as Persephone-Demeter-Hecate: the three daughters of Pelias dismembering their father" (*GM2*, 253). Why Olson calls Medea a "Phoenician / wench" is unclear. Graves shows her to be the daughter of King Aeetes's "first wife, the Causcasian nymph Asterodeia" (*GM2*, 237) whose name Graves glosses as "goddess of the sun" (*GM2*, 383). Medea was born in Colchis on the east coast of the Black Sea. As an Anatolian priestess of the Moon-goddess, she is possibly a relative of the Levantine Great Mother, Anath or Astarte, whom Olson may have had in mind. Olson connects Causcasian, Phoenician and North American "time" together a few stanzas later; the "Black Sea time" he there mentions would seem to be a reference to Aea, the land surrounding Colchis, or possibly the whole of Anatolia, about 1200 B.C.

Maximus's peculiar remark, "(if Medea // kills herself ..." is also at odds with mythology, where she is last seen flying back to Colchis in her serpent-drawn chariot. Furthermore, she does not die, but becomes immortal, reigning in the Elysian Fields (*GM2*, 257). The highly conditional "if" suggests that Maximus, as Jason, might emerge triumphant from his confrontation with this daughter of terror, the negative anima, if only she would kill herself. Later in the same poem, "she-who-Lusted After-the / Snake-in-the-Pond," a similar archetype of the femme-fatale figure drawn from Algonquin legend, is mentioned, but remains undeveloped until a later poem, beginning "Of old times there was a very beautiful / woman... ." (*MII*, 21). Thereafter, she resurfaces several more times as a reminder that she will not be repressed.

In "Maximus, / to himself, / as of 'Phoenicians':" (*MII*, 11) we encounter the similar but contemporary figure of Mei-Ling, Lady Chiang Kai-shek, of

China and Taiwan, who had earlier appeared in an essentially political context in "Tyrian Businesses" where Olson called her "that international doll"[3] who demands silk sheets when she's put up in the White House. There, as here, she calls herself Luck, and is symbolized by the swastika,[4] with its ambivalent modern connotation. In "Phoenicians" Olson contrasts this notion of a dangerous and capricious Goddess of Fortune with the Padma, the Black Chrysanthemum, which is everpresent, but out of reach. This black-gold flower, which also represents the spiritual sun within the individual—in contrast with the feminine Moon—is eternal, but difficult to more than glimpse.

In the next poem, "For 'Moira'" (*MII*, 12), Olson mentions two aspects of Greek Fate, or Necessity: Moira, who was familiar to the Greeks of classical times, and Heimarmene, a product of the 3rd Century gnostics. According to Jung, who quotes the gnostic, Zosimos, in *Psychology and Alchemy*, one object of gnosticism was to "'draw the soul forth from the dominion of Heimarmene into the realm of the incorporeal... .'"[5] One is again reminded of the popular Roman goddess, Fortuna, who includes the ideas of fate, luck, and necessity. Heimarmene, however, is not looked upon as favourable, but rather as cold and uncompromising, fate without mercy; "'those that have only bodily hearing are slaves of Heimarmene, for they neither understand nor admit anything else'" (*PA*, 368). In an emotional outburst, Olson rejects this unrelenting and coldly abstract image of Fate, and replaces her with "the / warmth of Moira." The poem opens:

> TO HELL WITH, like
> —& UP *heimarmene* ... (*MII*, 12)

as though it were possible to rid oneself of the negative elementary character of the Mother by a simple gesture.

Olson may not have owned a copy of Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*—no copy was found in his library after death—yet it is hard to believe he was unfamiliar with this classic, a popular translation of which was made by Robert Graves whose writings in mythology Olson much admired (he owned several editions of *The White Goddess*, for instance). While the immediate source for this poem is Jung's *Symbols of Transformation*, as Butterick has pointed out,[6] I think it is safe to assume that he knew the story in greater detail than the psychologist gives in his brief account.

Apuleius is the somewhat comic hero of his own tale, and not unlike Maximus, is on a journey through life's experience toward the discovery of his true, or full, self. Apuleius, we remember, through *ill luck*, has been transformed into an ass, the animal which to Isis is, beyond all others, "the most hateful beast in the universe."[7] In contrast to this ill luck, Isis, out of kindness, offers to metamorphose Apuleius back into his original shape if he will

henceforth devote himself to her service. The symbolism is obvious: Apuleius can transcend his hateful bestiality only in the service of, or through devotion to, the Goddess. Moreover, he has not forgotten that all his ill luck was brought about by his belief in "bad luck" or "blind fortune" which, the High Priest of Isis now informs him, "has no power to hurt those who devote their lives to the honour and service of our Goddess's majesty."[8] Similarly, in Jung's *Symbols of Transformation*, the ruthlessness of Heimarmene is mitigated by the benevolent influence of Isis who represents "that fortune which is not blind, but can see."[9] Jung's footnote occurs in the context of a discussion of the early years of the Christian brotherhood when it was realized that libidinal impulses must be replaced by a "higher form of social intercourse symbolized by a projected ('incarnate') idea (the Logos)... ."[10] Interestingly, Olson does not take up this positive theme of the Logos, which is related to the archetype of the Father, nor the theme of brotherly love, but concentrates on the problem presented by the various aspects of the feminine archetype and the resolution offered to Apuleius by Isis, also derived from Jung's note:

> The speech of the high priest of Isis (Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, XI, 15) reveals a similar train of thought. The young philosopher Lucius was changed into an ass, that ever-rutting animal hateful to Isis. Later he was released from the spell and initiated into the mysteries. During his disenchantment, the priest says: "On the slippery path of your lusty youth you fell a prey to servile pleasures, and won a sinister reward for your ill-fated curiosity... . But hostile fortune has no power over those who have devoted their lives to serve the honour and majesty of our goddess... . Now, you are safe, and under the protection of that fortune which is not blind, but can see." In his prayer to Isis, Queen of Heaven, Lucius says (XI, 25): "... thy saving hand, wherewith thou unweavest even the inextricably tangled web of fate, and assaugest the tempests of fortune, and restrainest the baleful orbits of the stars." Altogether, the purpose of the mysteries of Isis was to break the "compulsion of the stars" [i.e., of Heimarmene] by magic power.

The power of fate makes itself felt unpleasantly only when everything goes against our will, that is to say, when we are no longer in harmony with ourselves. The ancients, accordingly, brought εἱμαρμενη into relation with the "primal light" or "primal fire," the Stoic conception of the ultimate cause, or all-pervading warmth which produced everything and is therefore fate....[11]

Olson's rejection of the cold hand of fate (heimarmene) and his preference for "the / warmth of Moira" indicates a passive desire to be uplifted by the hands of Isis, the beneficent Mother. His admission that he should "get up off the ass,"

while of course a pun on the donkey into which Apuleius has been turned, more importantly indicates the torpor into which the poet feels he has fallen, the inability to get up and do something about his condition. If the poem is properly in keeping with its source in Jung, the implication is that the poet has fallen into a state of lustfulness and sensuality, a condition which Jung is at some pains to point out utterly prevents meaningful sublimation. All spiritual goals, creativity, and the process of individuation depend on the willful sacrifice of the libidinous ego in favour of a higher cause. What is lacking—in the poem, as well as in the poet—is that "primal fire" which symbolizes the energy, both personal and universal, which might bring about the harmony desired. The "all-pervading warmth" of Moira and the beneficent "hand of Isis" cannot be had simply through desire.[12] The poem succeeds only in its capacity to chart the poet's condition, and to indicate the two directions in which he is drawn. In this way it is very unlike Apuleius's account, in which a personal salvation is actually achieved. Maximus is not mentioned in the poem, nor is his imago very much further defined.

The significance of this poem lies in Olson's recognition that the dipolar aspects of the feminine can, and perhaps must, exist side by side; while at the same time it is possible to align one's will and actions with either, and so improve or retard one's psychic progress.

In "Maximus further on (December 18th 1959)" (*MII*, 13) the siren imagery recurs, and several particulars here suggest that Olson is intentionally portraying an archetypal circumstance wherein the hero, like Perseus, must accomplish a difficult feat in order to free his Andromeda from her cruel and unjust bondage to the rocks. Andromeda's parents had sacrificed her to propitiate Poseidon who had "sent a flood and a female sea-monster to devastate Philistia."[13] "On condition that, if he rescued her, she should be his wife and return to Greece with him, Perseus took to the air" (*GM1*, 240) with his magic sandals and helmet of invisibility, "grasped his sickle and, diving murderously from above, beheaded the approaching monster, which was deceived by his shadow on the sea" (*GM1*, 240).

From a psychological point of view, both sea-monster and Andromeda, the naked damsel, represent the extremes of the Anima; and Graves in an illuminating footnote links this myth with others which substantiate its fundamental, or archetypal, quality.

> Andromeda's story has probably been deduced from a Palestinian icon of the Sun-god Marduk, or his predecessor Bel, mounted on his white horse and killing the sea-monster Tiamat. This myth also formed part of Hebrew mythology: Isaiah mentions that Jehovah (Marduk) hacked Rahab in pieces with a sword (*Isaiah* li:9); and according to *Job* x:13 and xxvi:12, Rahab was the Sea. In the same icon, the jewelled,

> naked Andromeda, standing chained to a rock, is Aphrodite, or Ishtar, or Astarte, the lecherous Sea-goddess, 'ruler of men.' But she is not waiting to be rescued; Marduk has bound her there himself, after killing her emanation, Tiamat the sea-serpent, to prevent further mischief. In the Babylonian Creation Epic, it was she who sent the Flood. Astarte, as Sea-goddess, had temples all along the Palestinian coast, and at Troy she was Hesione, 'Queen of Asia,' whom Heracles is said to have rescued from another sea-monster. (*GM1*, 244 n)

Gen Douglas, her sister, and Olson, have gone swimming off Cressy's and climbed up to sun or rest on "a kelp / ledge," a rock exposed by the low tide. The two girls lying on the rocks remind the poet of several primordial pictures of women, such as the upper paleolithic rock carving of the 'Venus' at Laussel in Dordogne, which Olson probably saw in Erich Neumann's *The Great Mother*, plate 2. Olson further associates their forms, somewhat unflatteringly, with those of two sea mammals, the manatee, which frequents the Caribbean, and the dugong, which is found in the South Pacific; both belong to the Order 'Sirenia,' and were once supposed to have mermaid-like features. Illustrations of both are to be found in *Webster's 2nd*; it is likely that Olson was thinking of the Sirens of the Odyssey, and looking it up, followed on down to the word, Sirenia, where the manatee and dugong are mentioned.

Olson also identifies his Andromeda as an "awash Norn nurse waitress," which connects this poem with the previous one; the vocation of one of the two girls evidently reminds Olson of the Teutonic demigoddess of Fate[14] who, like Moira, more frequently occurs in the plural.

The spectacle of Gen Douglas and her friend set up a multitude of mythological and psychological associations which pull in two directions, evoking either the negative elementary character in the figures of the Siren, the Venus of Laussel, the sea-mammals or sea-monster or the destructive Fates—all of which may be subsumed by Graves's Tiamat; or the positive Anima, represented by Andromeda and the kindlier fates made soft by the terms "nurse" and "waitress." The poem is a transitional one, and Olson is unable to resolve the tensions created by the disparate feminine archetypes, though, as the last line clearly indicates, he would very much like to be able to play the hero to Andromeda: "the Impossible Rock Perseus the Husband not me," he laments, perhaps thinking of the Greek hero's superhuman advantages. Speaking in this connection in *The Origin and History of Consciousness*, Erich Neumann writes, "The experience of the captive and helper (our Andromeda and Perseus) marks out, within the threatening, monstrous world of the unconscious presided over by the Mothers, a quiet space where the soul, the anima, can take shape as the feminine counterpart of the hero, and as the complement to his ego consciousness."[15] Olson was no doubt painfully aware that he could not, at this

point, redeem his princess, and Neumann further stipulates that failure of the hero to rescue and then unite with his captive Soul clearly indicates that something is amiss, that the "lack of feminine relationship is compensated by an excessively strong unconscious tie to the Great Mother. The nonliberation of the captive expresses itself in the continued dominance of the Great Mother under her deadly aspect, and the final result is alienation from the body and from the earth, hatred of life, and world negation."[16] Such complete despair is not evidenced in the poem, but the Mothers are certainly in control. When Olson contrasts himself with Perseus, we must remember that the Greek hero's most powerful weapon (which he keeps in reserve in our rendition of the story) is the terrifying head of the gorgon, Medusa, whom he had earlier slain. According to Neumann again, this act implies that Perseus has overcome the suffocatingly destructive and petrifying power of the Terrible Mother, and has even learned to turn this power to his own advantage in overcoming further obstacles. "What the hero kills is only the terrible side of the female, and this he does in order to set free the fruitful and joyous side with which she joins herself to him."[17] In the Perseus myth, this "fruitful and joyous" aspect is represented by Andromeda.

With this in mind, we can now look back to "Maximus, from Dogtown—II" where the poet consciously turns his "Back on / the Sea" to "go inland, to / Dogtown" (*MII*, 9) and away from the harbor of Gloucester which is now corrupt.[18] Psychologically, this also indicates a turning from the impossibly oppressive Tiamat-Mother, to a new idea of Polis, a city of the Imagination. Olson aligns himself with the heroic "sons / who refused to be Denied / the Demon" (*MII*, 9) when he accepts the terrifying presence of Medea; by facing the negative anima (albeit with averted eyes) he begins the slow process of attaining self-hood. Olson mixes biographical and mythical material when he characterizes himself in the poem as his mother's son, rather than his father's: "as J-son / Johnson Hines / son Hines // sight."[19] The pun on Jason, leader of the Argonauts, whose name meant "healer," slights the poet's meagre connexion; the second pun, on "hindsight," suggests a drawing backward into the genetic matrix, which weakens the hero's necessarily superior nature. (Mythologically, the hero invariably transcends his personal parents, and it is obvious that Olson wants Maximus to achieve this metaphysical status.)

Later in the poem, Olson completes this concept of the hero in relation to the Mother in a confusing, but nonetheless extraordinary, abridgement of a Coptic Treatise on Gnosticism found in Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy*. Olson writes:

there is One!
One Mother
One Son

One Daughter
and Each the Father
of Him-Her-Self:

the Genetic
is Ma the Morphic
is Pa the City is Mother—

Polis, the Child-Made-Man-Woman is

...

Man) MONOGENE
(*MII*, 9-10)

The Gnostic viewpoint expressed the belief that everything issues from one source, the Son of God—even the Mother, who is referred to as the "Monad" and pictured diversely as a "ship," a "field," and a "City," all terms which would naturally appeal to Olson. Jung quotes the passage in support of his argument that the centre of a circle psychologically represents the "self as the summation of the total personality" (*PA*, 106) and at the same time, provides a "very well known allegory of the nature of God" (*PA*, 106-7). The passage is seminal to our understanding of Olson's idea of Maximus as "Son," and to his new found image of the City as a spiritual place.

The *Monogenes* precedes, and yet mystically dwells like a spark of light within its worldly manifestation which is called the Monad. From this *Monogenes*,

> ... it is the Monad come, in the manner of a ship, laden with all good things, and in the manner of a field, filled or planted with every kind of tree, and in the manner of a city, filled with all races of mankind... .
> (*PA*, 107)

The particular Monad of the City is then described as having twelve gates and a crown of twelve "Monads" (probably the jewels of a diadem) and a veil which represents its towers of defence. "This same," we are told, "is the Mother-City" μετροπόλισ of the Only-begotten μονογενήσ (*PA*, 107). Jung's commentary on the Gnostic passage influenced Olson as much or more than the treatise itself, and throws considerable light on not only this poem, but also several others, not least the posthumously published "The Secret of the Black Chrysanthemum,"[20] his last piece of writing. Jung comments as follows:

> As 'metropolis' ... the Monad is feminine, like the *padma* or lotus, the basic form of the Lamaic mandala (the Golden Flower in China and the Rose or Golden Flower in the West). The Son of God, God made manifest, dwells in the flower. (*PA*, 107-108)

Ultimately, Jung points out, "The Monad is a spark of light (Spinther) and an image of the Father, identical with the Monogenes" (*PA*, 109). As such, the creator is invoked as both "'the House and the Dweller in the House'" (*PA*, 109).

Thus, when Olson writes, "The Genetic / is Ma the Morphic / is Pa ..." (*MII*, 9), we recognize that he means Maximus must sit in the heart of Dogtown, like the jewel in the lotus, the Creator within his "House." The Algonquin figure, "with-the-House-on-his-Head" (*MII*, 9), who appears but briefly in this poem but who will be filled out later in "Maximus Letter # whatever" (*MII*, 31), is a further example of this mystical indweller. The importance of this masculine concept of the Morphic is that it identifies the creative activity of the poet with the Creator Father, who will be variously represented in subsequent poems as Zeus, Ptah, etc., while at the same time providing an image of self-fulfillment. Similarly, as Olson turns his "Back on / the Sea" to "go inland, to / Dogtown" he discovers a metaphysic for rendering the raw geological landscape of Cape Ann and the politically corrupt city of Gloucester into a city of the Imagination. This is further symbolized by the numerous references to "soft coal" which provides the chemical basis for the perfect "Diamond"; the metaphysical alchemy of this transformation makes up a large part of the poem, as well.

In "Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld]" *MII*, 14), Olson once again combines biographical and geographical information and discusses the problem of rendering his environmental facts into poetic truth. This often anthologized poem opens, "I come back to the geography of it," which immediately establishes that he is *returning* to first memories of summers spent in Gloucester with his parents, both of whom figure largely in the poem. His earliest memory, he tells us, is of the humourous, but mythical incident in which his father, "a man for kicks, came out of the tent roaring / with a bread-knife in his teeth to take care of / a druggist they'd told him had made a pass at / my mother, she laughing, so sure, as round / as her face, Hines pink and apple, / under one of those frame hats women then [wore]" (*MII*, 14).[21] There was little doubt that Olson's *father*, at least in jest, could play the role of the champion with *his* apple-cheeked damsel. In the much more abstract passage which follows the above episode, Olson insists that such concrete memories of events in early childhood are equally what lend form and meaning to his life now ("the generation of those facts / which are my words") and give the poet his particular shape within the poem. Roughly, all of this memory, coupled with the omnipresent geography which "forever ... leans in / on me," comprises the

"genetic," the uncut rock which we have identified with the overpowering Mother.[22] But in this poem, with an unequalled eloquence, the poet strikes back at the seemingly insurmountable force of Mother Earth, when he retaliates with:

> I compell
> backwards I compell Gloucester
> to yield, to [Maximus, to]
> change
> Polis
> is this

The City, which is identified with the Mother, must yield to the son, Maximus, who alone has the power to transform the "welter" of "novel," "incoming" "forms" and "events," because only the poet possesses sufficient knowledge of the Whiteheadian process of "negative prehension," whereby it is possible to receive vast amounts of stimuli, but automatically dissociate oneself from those which are irrelevant. As Whitehead points out, everyone practices "negative prehension" for sheer survival; but Olson, as the poet of his city, takes it upon himself to achieve greater than average discrimination.[23]

Just as Olson is forced to "come back to the *geography*" of Gloucester and Cape Ann, so he is compelled to force back the literal landscape and produce a geometry of the modern American's soul. As the poet learns to "discriminate his body" and to become, proprioceptively, "one / with his skin," his inner Self becomes free to take up residence within the metaphysical landscape which, ultimately, the "Polis" is.

NOTES

1. Charles Olson, "Maximus, from Dogtown—II," *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI [Maximus II]* (London, 1968), pp. 9-10; hereafter abbreviated MII.

2. Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, vol. 2 (Penguin Books, 1981), p. 238; hereafter abbreviated *GM2*.

3. Charles Olson, "Tyrian Businesses," *The Maximus Poems [Maximus I]* (London, 1960), p. 35.

4. *Webster's 2nd International Dictionary* defines swastika as a "sign of good luck or benediction" and gives the synonyms *fylfot* and *cammadion*. Its

etymology is from the sanskrit *svastika*, from *svasti* welfare, from *sa* well + *asti* being. It is found in many Asian, European and American cultures. See *Webster's New International Dictionary*, 2nd ed., unabridged (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), p. 25.

5. C.G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, 2nd ed., *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, vol. 12 (New York, 1968), pp. 360-361; hereafter abbreviated *PA*.

6. George Butterick, *A Guide to the Maximus Poems of Charles Olson* (Berkeley, 1978), pp. 260-261.

7. Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, trans. Robert Graves (Harmondsworth, 1960), p. 272.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 368.

9. C.G. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, vol. 1 (New York, 1962), p. 67n.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 67n.

12. In the introduction to his translation of *The Golden Ass*, Graves comments: "In Apuleius's day the ass typified lust, cruelty and wickedness ..." (p. 13). Some time after Apuleius has been turned into an ass and suffered considerable misfortune, it is Isis who presents herself to him to explain that his retransformation into human form depends on his promising to remain dedicated to her service (p. 272). It should be noted that her appearance is an act of grace; it is not brought about by the willfulness of the malcontent.

13. Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, vol. 1 (Penguin Books, 1981), p. 240; hereafter abbreviated *GM1*.

14. Generally, the *Moirae*, like the Norns, are three in number, and generally cover the past, present and future of both man's and gods' destinies. The Greek Fates are: "*Clotho* (the Spinner), who spins the thread of life, *Lachesis* (Disposer of Lots), who determines its length, and *Atropos* (Inevitable), who cuts it off. (Oskar Seyffert, *Dictionary of Classical Antiquities* [Cleveland, 1956], p. 398.) *Webster's 2nd* points out that originally "there appears to have been but one Norn, called by the Anglo-Saxons *Wyrd* and by the Norse *Urth*, and

her character was conceived in a gloomy light, making her name often equivalent to death doom (cf. HEL). Later two others were added making the Norse trio *Urth, Verthandi,* and *Skuld,* or Past, Present, and Future, in England represented by the Weird Sisters of Macbeth. Two give the blessings, the third the ills, of life." (*Webster's New International Dictionary,* 2nd ed., unabridged (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), p. 1665).

15. Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness,* trans. R.F.C. Hull, vol. 1 (New York, 1962), p. 203.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

18. See also "Letter, May 1, 1959" in *Maximus I,* p. 149ff, where the poet writes: "The sea / is east The choice Our backs / turned from the sea but the smell // as the minister said / in our noses / I am interfused / with the rubbish // of creation ..."; and in the same poem: "step off / onto the nation The sea / will rush over ...," and "start all over step off the / Orontes onto land no Typhon / no understanding of a cave / a mystery Cashes? ..." The Orontes, a river in western Syria, runs into the Mediterranean north of Tyre near Kadesh where Zeus fought with Typhon. The river is also known as "Typhon." Cf. also, "Letter #41 broken off," the opening poem of *MII,* p. 9.

19. Olson's mother was Mary Hines, daughter of John Hines (1846-1918) who came from Ireland to the United States some time before 1872. See "The Grandfather-Father Poem" in *Archaeologist of Morning* (London, 1970), p. 216; Butterick, *Guide,* p. 251.

20. Published in *Olson: The Journal of the Charles Olson Archives,* III (Spring 1975), pp. 64-74, and Butterick's note, p. 75.

21. *MII,* p. 14. For the clarity it offers, I have restored this poem to the form in which it first appeared in the *Yale Literary Magazine,* CXXXI, Nos. 3-4 (April 1953), 45-46. It was this version Olson read in Vancouver in the summer of 1963 before *MII* was published. The restorations give a better indication of what Olson was doing with the figure of Maximus, and help to clarify the syntax. I do not consider the final version an improvement over the earlier draft, with the exception of "occasions" which appeared in the singular in the Yale version where it makes poor sense.

22. C. Kerenyi, in C.G. Jung and C. Kerenyi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (New York, 1963) p. 51, points out that for "the Greeks the rocky landscape symbolized ... the uttermost beginning of things ..., the world of the Mother—the maternal world." As such it represents the unformed, incomplete world of the womb.

23. See A.N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York, 1960), p. 35, where the philosopher postulates "two species of prehensions: (a) 'Positive prehensions' which are termed 'feelings,' and (b) 'negative prehensions' which are said to 'eliminate from feeling.'" Or again, on p. 66, "An actual entity has a perfectly definite bond with each item in the universe. This determinate bond is its prehension of that item. A negative prehension is the definite exclusion of that item from positive contribution to the subject's own real internal constitution." In section III, "The Theory of Prehension," Whitehead continues his discussion of this subject; Olson's "Letter 27," and indeed much of his theory, is indebted to this section of Whitehead's book. Even the terms "Genetic" and "Morphological" have their inception here, though not in the more strictly psychological way in which Olson clearly uses them. From Whitehead, also, come the terms "novel," "event," "occasion," "personal order" and the "spatial nature" of events—Whitehead's "extensive continuum" and "spatialization": ("The actual entity as described by the morphology of its satisfaction is the actual entity 'spatialized,' to use Bergson's term. The actual entity, thus spatialized, is given individual fact actuated by its own 'substantial form'" (p. 336).

Once again, a most seminal passage in *Process and Reality* for Olson's "Letter 27" concerns "negative prehension"; Olson differentiates his method from that of the Greeks who, in contrast to modern "Americans," did have a "strict personal order / for their inheritance." A modern, who can not draw upon such genetic data for self definition, must rely solely upon the "complex of occasion[s]," which, if properly prehended and transformed, will yield "a geometry / of spatial nature"—a metaphysical man of his being. On p. 346, under the subheading "The Theory of Feelings," Whitehead describes first how we determine, by negative prehension, which feelings we will allow in, but then goes on to show how even our negative prehensions leave their "scars" on our being, which Olson refers to as "all those antecedent predecessions, the precessions // of me, the generations of those facts" which, though he is not always aware of them, make up his character. They are, of course, biological, cultural and geographical (or environmental). Whitehead writes:

> In this process (of experience through discrimination), the negative prehensions which effect the elimination are not merely negligible. The process through which a feeling passes in constituting itself, also

> records itself in the subjective form of the integral feeling. The *negative prehensions have their own subjective forms* which they contribute to the process. A *feeling bears on itself the scars of its birth*; it recollects as a subjective emotion its struggle for existence; it *retains the impress of what it might have been, but is not.* It is for this reason that *what an actual entity has avoided* as a datum for *feeling may yet be an important part* of its environment. (Italics mine.)

For Olson, however, as the tension and assertiveness of this poem indicate, such "genetic" feelings "recollected" from childhood and before are fraught with difficult Maternal associations, the "scars" of which are evident here, and throughout, the sequence. Even, and perhaps especially, that which has been "avoided" must now be encountered anew, "compelled backward," and made "to yield" "to Maximus" and "to / change" before the True City, or Polis, can take Form (the Morphic). The poet will go on wrestling with his soul until the problem of the Mother can be solved, or internalized; the image of the Father fully realized (formed); and the two figures alchemically wed. Of course this is an extension of Creeley's reminder that "form is never more than an extension of content" (Charles Olson, *Selected Writings*, ed. Robert Creeley [New York, 1966], p. 16). That "the Genetic / is Ma" refers to "content" and hints at its biological complexity; Olson also connects this with the idea that "the City is Mother," a pun on the etymology of the Greek *metro-polis*, mother-city. That the "morphic / is Pa" is a straight-forward connection with Creeley's "form," though again Olson is thinking, ultimately, of the Imago of the male self, and its sources in physical and psychological experience.

PETER QUARTERMAIN

# SIX PLAINTS AND A LAMENT FOR BASIL BUNTING

> "When I stop liking tea and cigarettes
> I'll send for the undertaker."

Who was this man whose death at 85 is so saddening? Looking back: images, words—

1. *Late 1941. Alloa, Fife:* Bunting, B., Leading Aircraftsman, Serial number 1119305, learning how to drive an army lorry, at the front of a large convoy, spots up ahead an archway, on the left side of the road, on which, as he gets nearer, he can read "George Younger's Brewery." So he leads the whole convoy into the yard. "We all got a free drink," he said. *April 1971. Ontario*: "A sign in Prescott caught my eye ST PAUL ST BILLIARDS. Popular saint, that last." *November 1984. Hexham*: Waiting in a shop to get his watch fixed. "There's a watch that has an eye in it where it shouldn't have." Facing us, a placard promoting ACCURIST. Our slow wits took some time to read "accurst."

Basil Bunting: an attentive and opportunist eye (and ear) with little or no respect for Authority, save that which he chose to recognize for himself. "You cannot be useful and retain possession of your mind,"[TxU*] he told Zukofsky in 1947—this, when he was in Teheran, being very useful indeed to the British Foreign Office.

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* Where Basil Bunting's words quoted here are not from published sources or private collections, permission to print is as follows:
1. CtY: letters to Ezra Pound, Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University;
2. InU: letters to Dorothy Pound, Lilly Library, Indiana University;
3. NBuU: letters to Jonathan Williams, Jargon Society Papers, SUNY at Buffalo;
4. TxU: letters to Louis Zukofsky, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin. 

2. *September 1972. Wylam, Northumberland*: "Did I tell you about the cats? The snake-and-lizard man came to see me, hunting a lizard said to have been seen in Northumberland, where it had no business to be. I mentioned casually the wild cats (Felix Sylvestris) now plentiful in the border forests. He got enormously excited, got on his motor-bicycle and rushed off to the forest, where he found three wild cats in a single evening. Apparently none of the farmers or forestry people had ever thought of mentioning wild cats to the naturalists, so it was news to *Nature*, which ran an article, and to the BBC's natural history section. They asked Simms *who* was an expert on wildcats, and the damn man said I was; so for a week the BBC was ringing me everyday, trying to get me to admit that I knew all about wild cats. Now I had never even seen one loose, only heard about them in the pubs near the forests. They wouldn't believe me. At last I choked them off (their photographers got a good picture of one eating a pheasant), and went out for a ride, which took me into the forest. Coming down a very narrow remote lane I stopped to examine a hedgehog, deciding not to take it home to our garden because the dog and two cats would have gone mad trying to bite it, and just as I was about to get in to the car again I saw a wild cat, stalking a couple of young rabbits. It was unmistakeably the wild creature, heavier on the haunch than the domestic cat, and with a head smaller in proportion to the body. So that was that." *The late 1950's. Throckley and then Wylam*: Working 5 p.m. to 2 a.m. for *The Newcastle Daily Journal*, cycling back and forth from home to Newcastle, getting to bed perhaps by 3:30, sometimes not till 4 or later, obliged (to keep his job) to "remain an 'expert' on foreign affairs" by reading "very fully" the foreign despatches in the *Times* and the *Telegraph* and other papers for two or three hours after he got up and before he went to work, long long days, cycling in the "tolerable" autumn night and in the winter, often struggling against a gale, stupid with fatigue, "tired of fools," hating it. But at Corn Close, nearly thirty years later, he told Jonathan Williams (and a BBC crew): "That was worth doing. In the middle of the night you saw all sorts of creatures on that road that you never see in the daytime. Every kind of owl I got familiar with, and foxes carrying chickens in their mouths, and things of that sort. It was very nice in some ways, of course you were terribly tired, a tiring business being up all night working on a newspaper and then trying to sleep when everyone else is up and about in the day."

A love of animals and wildlife; a hatred of pomposity; a mischievous eye.

3. *September 1973. Connemara*: "I had a conversation with three donkeys. They were wandering along a road, where I was taking a morning stroll. I patted the first that reached me, whereupon it instantly laid its head in my bosom, while its mates joined it. One donkey isnt too hard to manage, but three, all trying to eat your jacket at the same time, are a handful. A tourist car arrived and couldnt get past. The man honked awhile, then stuck his head out of the

window and bawled: "Take your bloody asses out of my way!", so I let on to be a bit stupider than I am, and held him up quite a while." *April 1973. Wylam*: "Columbia Broadcasting did a film of me in December... . I rashly took them to Blanchland for lunch, and they'd never seen anything like that before, so I was kept reading poetry and walking about in icy winds on the fells near the top of Bolt Law for three days... . There was some fun. When I was feeling fed up I warned them that the place swarmed with vipers, and enjoyed watching them step delicately around, examining every tuft of heather before gingerly putting their feet down."

A ready glee, often, at the back of those alert and curious eyes, forever alive with mischief and with sheer delight at human oddity. Telling a story, reading a poem, the brown eyes glance back and forth among his listeners; smiling and chuckling to himself, stroking his beard, smoothing the hair behind his ears, dragging on his cigarette.

4. *June 1949. Teheran:* "A friend of mine—another Ezra—was returning from my house to the city in a small open car, when he was hailed by an Arab crying 'Stop.' He didnt stop, whereupon the Arab began to abuse him thoroughly in his own language. As it happens, Ezra is bi-lingual in Arabic and Persian, so he stopped the car, beckoned the Arab over, and hit him on the head with the handle of the jack. A police car which was passing took both of them to the police station and before the magistrate. The magistrate asked: 'Why did you hit this man on the head with the handle of a jack?'

Ezra said: 'Because he abused me.'

The magistrate asked: 'What did he say?'

Ezra told him. The magistrate turned to the Arab and asked: 'If someone said this to you in Baghdad what would you do?'

The Arab said: 'I would rip up his belly.'

The magistrate gave sentence: 'I cannot let you off. You were seen to hit this man over the head with the handle of a jack, so I fine you the minimum, five tumans. If you care to pay twenty tumans you may hit him over the head with the jack itself.'[InU] *September 1972. Wylam*: "One day I stopped at the Farmer's Arms in Muker, in Swaledale, for a sandwich. I ordered two, one beef, one cheese. I'd forgotten I was in Yorkshire, where people really eat, and the sandwiches were enormous by English standards (You wouldnt gasp at them in North America). The girl brought them in and set them down and went off to the kitchen again. Within a minute a man came in, went to the bar and ordered two sandwiches, one beef, one cheese. The barman hollered out to the kitchen: 'Another beef and another cheese, quick,' and there came back the most astonished voice I have ever heard saying: 'What! Has he eaten them *already*!'"

Human absurdity. He hated the city, all his life. In 1938 he talked of "the foulness of town life,"[TxU] and thirty years later complained in an interview that cities "cut you off from trees, wild life—all the things you ultimately rely on."

Yet he liked Los Angeles, and Isfahan; when he lived in London in the twenties and thirties, sporadic as that domicile may have been, he found great interest and even delight in the indigenous working class population, in what he called "the common people"; he knew a great deal about music halls and popular entertainment, and wrote at least one fine essay on "Folk-Song in London." What he despised was "suburban cleanliness" and "cultured minds," preferring "peasant comfort" to "middleclass convenience." He went for life and vigour in a place, not its respectability. When in 1957 he moved from Throckley to Wylam he was pleased by the closeness of animal life, and his great delight in the company of children was a delight in their unabashed and vigorous curiosity. On 8 August 1972 he reported, on his return from an appallingly wretched year in Victoria, that "little children in the next houses have taken to ringing the bell: 'Please can Mr. Bunting come and play with us?'" In London in 1928 he noticed that "the chief singers are the children," and when in 1977 he moved to Washington, Tyne and Wear, his great tolerance of and patience with children extended to, embraced, and delighted in children of three shouting "fuck off!" or "kick the dog in the balls!" In Washington he lived in a bare and ugly row house in a cramped jungle of concrete-block and brick boxes in dead-end curving streets where by car it is a mile or even two to a neighbour's house less than fifty yards along the footpath; impossible to police; crammed with unemployed (like many another "new town"); hundreds of snotty-nosed kids running round with nothing to do and nowhere to play except scruffy minute patches of grass, or the dead-end street.

5. *August 1977. Washington, Tyne and Wear:* "Children alone make the place endurable. Four or five boys last night who had made their bicycles horses to drag home-made chariots racing round our nearest spot of green at a great pace, in defiance, apparently, of the police, who do not notice that if they prohibit such an entirely harmless infringement of the laws there'd be nothing left for the boys to do but break street lamps, telephone kiosks and people's cars. They got on fine with me, made me Emperor to start the races. Or two little boys and a little girl so loquacious that she kept me sitting 3/4 of an hour on my doorstep without ever closing her lips for ten consecutive seconds, telling me about a deceased goldfish."[NBuU]

Patience and common sense; delight in spontaneity and contempt of hypocrisy. Practical. A kind of astonished amazement at stupidity; a ready dismissal of fools; thorough impatience with the smug. If he hated cities, he hated petty officials of all sorts, but civil servants ("desk and pen vermin")[TxU] even more—and pedants. Proof-reading a University journal in a printer's shop in the early fifties "enormously increased my regard for soldiers and politicians, not usually thought of as very intelligent or scrupulous classes, but less dishonest and less fatuous than academics."[TxU] He called himself (with Edgell Rickword) the last of the Victorians; he preferred the small and delicate to the

large-scale and grandiose: the delicacy of Persian to the colossal aggressiveness of Roman and Egyptian architecture, the clarity of Dowland and Byrd to the weight of Wagner or of Beethoven's symphonies, the music of Wyat to the bombast of Shakespeare; he held the autonomous family as a unit before the village before the town before the city before the state and said that the bigger the autonomous unit gets the worse it is for everybody. The only hope for our children, he thought, was to destroy uniformity, centralisation, big factories, big states and big cities. "I like the common eye," he told Pound in 1954, "cleared maybe, and very sharp, much better than the inward one or the lens-aided dissecting eye."[CtY] He said our morals need enlarging, and did not believe that man's highest aim is his physical comfort or even his physical sufficiency. *August 1948. Teheran*: "The most upright, religious, even saintly, man I ever met after regaling me [in India] with utterly uneatable dishes of mixed peppers decided to entertain me the remainder of the night by taking me to a series of brothels. To revisit Pompei AFTER seeing something of India throws a light on the ancient world that one isnt given at school... . All this is shocking and therefore must not be mentioned or seen. But unless we stop being shocked and receive these things as part of human nature, and by no means an ignoble or uncivilised part, where the hell are we going to get to? Only to new, self-erected blank walls."[InU] He saw principles, beliefs, theories, abstractions, as so much mumbo-jumbo designed to keep men content with the shoddy, the third- or even twelfth-rate; to keep them subject to an authority not their own. "Prohibition," he told *Contempo* magazine in 1932, "is the most effective red-herring yet invented. It beats even religion for keeping people from thinking about more fundamental structural defects in their society. It beats even baseball." A practical intelligence, forever alert to detail: in 1934 he wondered why slum dwellers (such as those in the Tyne Dock) didn't shoot a few policemen now and then, so their plight might be noticed and attended to, and called the idea that abstract nouns have other than a grammatical significance a "lunatic notion."[CtY] He kept insisting to Pound that he look at the practical implications of his ideas, told him that "if you start thinking about economics in terms of eats and drinks and sleeps it's liable to be less misleading,"[CtY] and broke with him in 1938 because, helplessly monotheistic in his intellectual habits, he'd never considered "the implications of polytheism in action"[CtY] and was probably incapable of doing so. Uncompromising, then; a Northerner. Solid.

6. *March 1934. Tenerife:* "I knew several miner's leaders at one time and another, from checkweighmen to old William Straker (the chap who had found out in the course of fifty years or so of mining politics that billiards was worse than booze). I even talked once or twice to old Charley Fenwick, before he died, a man who had been a Northumberland miner's official since the middle of last century and went down the pit to work at the age of nine. Damn it, I was brought up in all that, Joseph Skipsey is said to have dandled me when I was a

baby, and he'd been down the pit before the first factory acts touched them. I was on the spot when the View Pit was flooded and forty-five men drowned, I heard what the men had to say about it and the whole cursed system when there wasnt any question of politics, mining or otherwise, but just sheer human commonsense. My grandfather, whom I knew pretty well when I was a kid, was a miner, son of a miner. I know the solidity of those people, and I watched it break up in 26, when I was all the time in a mining village, took the chair at one of Cook's meetings, stuck a knife in the tyres of a government strikebreaking lorry and tried unsuccessfully nearly every paper in the country to get the scandalous faked benches of magistrates who condemned the strikers to years of hard labour shown up. Not even the independent labour party's rag would publish the facts."[CtY] *November 1984. Whitley Chapel:* "One girl, 16, wearing her mother's wedding dress because there was nothing else in the house for her to put on except her factory working clothes. The Bishop of Durham is quite right about the extreme poverty of these people, though no one in the southern newspapers does anything but mock." *1968. Wylam*: "I like to go to museums and look at things people have made: brocades, pots, furniture, durable things. Poems should be durable too. Potters work in space, and poets in time, but the results are much the same. They make something beautiful and lasting."

An insistence on the tangible world, a scrupulous attention to detail. Hence, his edition of Skipsey's poems in 1976: "one small lifelong commitment discharged at last;"[NBuU] a passionate love of the North, and a detailed knowledge of its history. An empiricist, he insisted on the primacy of the sensible world; he was an anarchist "who believes nothing because he can't, not because there are no pleasing or even useful beliefs to choose from;"[TxU] he rejected all belief which went against the available evidence. Despising journalism for its continual compromise with the truth, loathing it, he was nevertheless (in the words of a *Times* editorial) "scrupulously fair and objective" and one of the great *Times* Correspondents. Attention to detail: whatever else his poetry is, it is flesh and blood: "I like a new landfall," he told Dorothy Pound in 1948; "certain graces of men and trees and hills, the greased leather hides of Zulu girls, the lack of cupidity in remote places and places grown out-of-date, Portuguese sailor's shirts. I like the monkeys to be in the trees, not on chains; bougainvillea; the banyan; the snake-guarded wild bananas in bush you must cut as you go, a life more physical, less logical, less covetous, less distilled out of the past, than the chained life we lead. That's ... why I hate earning a living."[InU] An anarchist (and a Quaker) he did not believe in causes, disliked Bunyan's prose ("He's alright if you want to *preach*"), did not believe in raisons d'être, "never felt the need of one. Do exist, anyway."[CtY] The details he paid attention to were always immediate, always physical and tangible. When he sent Pound his *Collected Poems* in 1968 Pound read them onto a tape, but broke

down—after several false starts—at page 122, "On the Flyleaf of Pound's Cantos," and in October 1970, a depressed Ezra Pound wrote him in Vancouver: "If I had paid your attention to detail, I might have done something decent." A keen eye, a clear sense of priorities, an insistence on clarity of knowledge and of thought. The eye of a poet, the eye of intelligence. A sense of the concrete that serves men well in times of war: "de-briefing," he told Dorothy Pound, "is taking a pilot's report and crossexamining him to compare what he actually did on a sortie with what he was instructed to do. In a Fighter Squadron, the Operations Officer and the Intelligence Officer are one and the same man. He receives a rather general order from H.Q. and works out all the implications down to the exact minute of every detail, using not only all the official information he has on file, but also his personal knowledge of his pilots, their capacity & temperament. He then 'briefs' everybody concerned—passes on the now exact orders together with every scrap of useful information he can get—where the flak is, what the route looks like, what sort of bloke commands any enemy squadron likely to intercept them, & so on. He checks the planes as they go off, investigates crashes at take-off & reports to H.Q. When the sortie is over, he interviews each pilot separately and compiles an exact narrative of all that took place or was seen. That is the 'de-briefing,' which has to be done like lightning and still remain perfectly accurate. It is good mental training: you can almost feel yourself getting shrewder in your estimate of men. I am glad I had a year of it (even though, in action, as we mostly were, you get hardly any sleep or food, being always at work), & I think it probably helped me in surpassing other political intelligence officers and minor diplomats who had not had any similarly strenuous training."[InU] The clarity of prose is remarkable, and derives from Hume, Halifax, Swift and Darwin. His favourite novelist was Dickens.

7. *December 1971. Vancouver, British Columbia*: "The war did me a lot of good: it gave me confidence, assurance in myself as a man of action; it gave me power of decision under great responsibility. It gave me authority: I learned my Wing-Commander-act." *March and April 1951. Lucca:* "War: ... an activity which has pleasures of its own, an exercise of certain faculties which need exercise: in which death is neither a bugbear nor a consummation but just happens... . Freedom from war, like freedom from poverty, can be pursued at the expense of things better worth preserving than peace and plenty, of which, I should say, the most important and the most threatened, is personal autonomy."[TxU] *October 1971. Victoria, British Columbia*: "I can say with complete immorality that I enjoyed the war very much. I managed throughout to keep things lively for myself."

A thorough man; whatever he did, he did completely. A varied war: basic training at RAF Padgate, then June 1940, barrage-balloons, escorting North Sea convoys to Murmansk as Mate on the converted yacht the *Golden Hind* (and getting nearly blown out of the water by a too-near depth charge). 1942, as

interpreter to Persia (via Sierra Leone, Kenya, Natal, India), where he lost some teeth to scurvy. 1943, four weeks in a convoy of eighty lorries, from Baghdad across Arabia Petrea to Tripoli and the battle of Wadi Akarat; the last weeks of the Siege of Malta; an intimate view of the Sicilian campaign from Eisenhower's war-room (which he helped set up) and then from his fighter squadron in Catania (where in the famine he set up a peasants' market and a missing persons' bureau). 1944, Naples (where he was nearly blown up), then by sea to England in time for his squadron to cover the invasion of Normandy. Late 1944 or early 1945, back to Persia, as Squadron Leader, Vice-Consul in Isfahan and then in 1946 to Baghdad as chief of Combined Intelligence for an area which included the whole of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Persia, and others. He found work "a habit-forming vice, like opium"[TxU] and action "a lust that is hard to abandon."[InU] He stayed in Persia until the middle of 1946 and went back in February 1947: "I'm afraid I shall want to be moving and at grips with people and outwitting them till I die,"[InU] he said, and managed, off and on, to stay in Persia—either with British Intelligence and/or as *Times* Correspondent—until 1950 when he lost his job with the *Times*. So the Foreign Office sent him to Italy to stop a Russian takeover but some fool from the embassy met him at the plane and blew his cover: he was shot at a few times (just as, when he went back to Persia for the *Times* in late 1951, Baqai and his thugs would start riots and throw stones at him), but he did what he could, and he made a start on *The Spoils*. A thorough man: under his care the Tribal Map of Persia, the first of its kind outside India, was completed (and is still unpublished, buried in the Foreign Office archives), and detailed histories of oil concessions, of the Qajar dynasty, and of much else besides, were done. He spent, in Persia, all of his Foreign Office allowance, and all of his war-time savings (what little they were) to get the job done—and what was his reward? Mossadeq threw him out of Persia in 1952 (the thugs had done their work), and when he reached England, after driving from Teheran with his pregnant wife and two-year-old daughter (the journey took a month), he could not pay the enormous Duty on what few possessions he had been able to rescue from Mossadeq; the *Times* could not or would not give him a job, and when he got to his mother's house in Throckley he was virtually penniless. "My very considerable services to the state," he told Zukofsky in March 1953, "havent entitled me to anything whatever."[TxU]

Because he had spent the last few years living outside the country, he did not qualify for unemployment insurance; that same month he told Dorothy Pound that "none of us is entitled to any of the benefits of the welfare state except free medical attention."[InU] Whenever a potential employer asked him what he'd been doing for the last umpteen years his claims sounded extravagent; if he wanted to write something, what could he write? The Official Secrets Act stopped that. *July 1953. Throckley*: "I cant get a job at seven quid a week (no experience) let alone get listened to. What they mean by experience Lord knows. Last board

that interviewed me simply refused to believe my record. Wouldnt even take the trouble to check up and find it true. 'You mean to say a former GS02 and Counsellor is applying for a piddling little job like this? Make your claims more modest next time.'"[CtY] *June 1953. Throckley*: "The government is applying a last turn of the screw, demanding duty and purchase tax on the car the *Times* abandoned to me. I cant pay, I'm not even allowed to sell the car which is running up debts in a garage. But if now they fix a government debt on me I'll end in gaol for having refused to falsify news to the disadvantage of our government. Such is democratic gratitude... . my children must starve and I be denied any chance to show sagacity elsewhere. This week we cannot pay the butcher. And little worms who hardly know enough Persian to construe a few pages of the Chahar Maqaleh have lectureships, because they listened to professors nearly as ignorant as themselves, but I who know their literature—and the ways of their tribesmen—I cannot be the slightest use, or at any rate, cannot be paid for it."[TxU] *September 1953. Throckley:* "The Air Force expects me to keep my uniform handy for the next war 'to serve in the same position you occupied before demobilisation,' ie, chief of intelligence for a very big region. I wonder, by the way, how many General Staff Officers, Grade Two, are now drawing public assistance?"[TxU]

Human absurdity, blindness, stupidity. His own damn pride no doubt got in the way, that Victorian or is it Edwardian rectitude, that code of gentlemanly conduct, of not making a fuss, of not airing your linen (clean or dirty) in public. But if he was at all bitter in his later years he had every right to be. Because he had lived so much abroad, he did not qualify for a full old-age pension, which at 65 was pitifully small. So at the Queen's pleasure he was awarded a Civil List pension to make up the difference—but, indexed at a lower rate and taxed at a higher one, it barely paid for his cigarettes. In the middle 1950's Basil Bunting and his family, valued servants of the state, were supported with food parcels sent by Ezra Pound, inmate of St. Elizabeth's Hospital for the Criminally Insane. The British treatment of Basil Bunting is a national disgrace. So in his late sixties and early seventies he underwent a series of voluntary exiles: Santa Barbara, Vancouver, Binghamton, Victoria. *July 1971. Wylam:* "Can you imagine me teaching poor devils to read Bellow, Styron (who's he?), Cary, to say nothing of Lawrence, Brecht, Beckett, Fitzgerald; or in another course Stevens, Hart Crane, Berryman, Lowell, somebody called O'Hara, Cummings, Duncan? The prospect appals me. If I hadn't dependants I'd never pretend to do it. It makes me quite sick to anticipate it, and the only comfort is that ... I should save enough to live a year or more without working, if the work doesn't kill me first. This syllabus will prevent me being the only real use I can be to the university, which would be to let them know of the existence of David Jones, Zukofsky, MacDiarmid and so on. Even by A-level standards their

syllabus is fifteen years or more out of date. By what I'd reckon of university standards, thirty years." His treatment has been shameful.

And the critics, the professors, and even his publishers—all the people supposed to *know*—have treated him no better. They took too much at face value his too-often-quoted estimate of himself as "minor poet, not conspicuously dishonest," as though self-advertisement was characteristic of all writers. But self-promotion was not part of his stock-in-trade, and he did not elaborate on the meaning of "minor," nor its context. His own stubborn pride, perhaps, forbad any such thing. But in private he would relax, and talk a little. *December 1970. Vancouver*: After reading MacDiarmid aloud, over some beer, in the evening, a list of major writers ("to aim at less is to aim lower") and a list of "secondaries" (Catullus, Chaucer, Sidney, the troubadours, Eliot). The majors? Homer, Ferdosi, Manuchehri, Dante, Wyat, Spenser, Wordsworth, Whitman, Pound, Yeats, Zukofsky, Jones, MacDiarmid. *August 1953. Throckley:* "I've been thinking ... about how and where I got whatever I know and feel about poetry, and the more I think the bigger Malherbe's part in it seems. Wordsworth, when I was a small kid, showed me what it was; Rossetti's translations from the Dolce Stil people, in my teens, and Whitman at the same time, enlarged the scope. Horace gave the first inkling of how it was done (odes). Malherbe produced all I afterwards found in Ez's writing except what I'd already got from Horace. Ez and Spenser, great galleries of technical accomplishment. Lucretius. Dante. And after that, Hafez for what I got from Horace (and Ez from Chinese) only more, taken further: Manuchehri, greater and more splendid gallery than Ez and Spenser: Wyat: the Mo' Allaqat: and for sheer pleasure, when I am not out to learn or have my mind fixed, for diversion, for sheer living, Homer and Ferdosi."[TxU] *November 1970. Vancouver*: "'How Duke Valentine Contrived' is not worth keeping; it's got a few good lines but it's an exercise. Its main if not its only virtue is the accuracy of the landscape, of the directions—and that virtue is Machiavelli's. I'm sure when Shelley drowned he thought 'If only I could get my hands on the works. So I could destroy them. They're no good.'"

As a poet Basil Bunting was a progressivist (though he did not believe in progress): each poem he wrote must do something different, that had not been done before. What minor poet of this century—or for that matter, what self-proclaimed or widely-anthologised "major" one—would reject as "better lost" such a poem as "Per Che No Spero" which, capturing so nicely as it does the sound of a dinghy (or, more accurately, a cutter) being slapped by the waves, originally formed the opening lines of a longer and untitled poem, itself destroyed. An old man's casting-up of accounts, that poem ended with a bit of Hadrian's hymn, "anima, blandula, vagula":

> Poor soul! Softy, whisperer,
> hanger-on, pesterer, sponge!

Where are you off to now?
Pale and stiff and bare-bummed,
It's not much fun in the end.

What *minor* poet, looking through *The Spoils*, would worry: "Is the falcon stuff too commonplace?":[TxU]

Have you seen a falcon stoop
accurate, unforseen
and absolute, between
wind-ripples over harvest? Dread
of what's to be, is and has been—
Were we not better dead?
His wings churn air
to flight.
Feathers alight
with sun, he rises where
dazzle rebuts our stare,
wonder our fright.

He himself preferred the fowler passage, just before these lines: their use of rhyme and of consonant pattern is not so obvious. A minor poet? What other poet in this century, besides perhaps Zukofsky in the opening of "The Translation," would RISK that astonishing line: "A thrush in the syringa sings"? A minor poet? "I'd rather have somebody who is thinking of Horace call my poems bloody bad," he told Zukofsky in 1949, "than hear them praised by somebody who is thinking of—who? oh—Dylan Thomas."[TxU] If the very few translations he did (not all of them collected) are anything to go by, he is—or could have been—the best translator of Horace we have had. What makes his death so extraordinarily sad is not simply the neglect he suffered, though God knows he suffered that, but the sheer *loss* of work that neglect caused. And the misery he had, feeling that loss. "Minor poet, not conspicuously dishonest?" *September 1964. Wylam:* "I owe poems to ... Cooper Stephenson, who was killed in the great battle of March 1918, the closest of all friends I've had; and to Peggy Greenbank and her whole ambience, the Rawthey valley, the fells of Lunedale, the viking inheritance all spent save the faint smell of it, the ancient Quaker life accepted without thought and without suspicion that it might seem eccentric: and what happens when one deliberately thrusts love aside, as I then did—it has its revenge. That must be a longish poem."[TxU] He wrote *Briggflatts*, and the poem for and on Cooper Stephenson gestated. It, too, would be a Northern poem, and would include the Cliffords and the Percys and the Rising of 1569: *May 1972. Wylam:* "There is a conspiracy to pretend [teenage

girls] dont exist until they reach 18, and the P&O is in it. For a few days [on the *Canberra*, coming home from that hellish year in Victoria] I was a general grandfather-confessor to them and thought I'd extend my knowledge of these pleasing creatures, but then the youngest of them all suddenly annexed me, led me about the deck etc, and all the others sheered off. This is in fact a fortunate event. I'd been looking at the new moon, the April new moon that takes the attitude of Wordsworth's 'little boat' in *Peter Bell*, Ezra's barge of Ra-Set, I think the most convincing new moon I ever saw: and the next night an occultation of Jupiter who vanished of a sudden behind the old moon's corpse and then reappeared as a drop of molten silver slithering down the new moon's flanks; and I was fresh from this when I saw Linnaea, slim as the new moon and even blonder (and, alas! as remote as the moon), and there she was, Selanna, chick of Leda's egg immeasurably beautiful and not suspecting her beauty and the responsibility it lays on her. All I've been meditating for three years and could get no sense into lay around like blocks that have found their keystone, and I started picking them up to see how perfectly they fell into their places. So this little lass had only to look out of the corner of her eye to find an obedient servant.... A bonus: her name, grandmother to granddaughter for six or seven generations, is a feminine form of Linnaeus, and though there's no certainty she seems to be descended of the man who named the flowers, as Adam did before him. Not Selene only, and Helen, but Persephone too. The difficulty is going to be how to translate what the myths imply into a mythless modern tongue." The drafts of *A New Moon* that he destroyed were good enough for most poets of his time, indeed better. A minor poet?

> Such syllables flicker out of grass:
> 'What beckons goes': and no glide lasts
> nor wings are ever in even beat long.
> A male season with paeonies, birds bright under thorn.
> Light pelts hard now my sun's low,
> it carves my stone as hail mud
> till day's net drapes the haugh,
> glaze crackled by flung drops.
> What use? Elegant hope, fever of tune,
> new now, next, in the fall, to be dust.

Sound. Consonants. Quantity. The attentive ear. But a progressivist: destroy it. "A poet's business is to get a language that wont have to rely on anything so slipshod as algebra,"[CtY] he once said. Every word must be *new*. *November 1950. Lucca:* "You and I [Louis], have more than the whole ruck of others who have done well out of poetry. And I'm not even noticeably eccentric on the page! Why? What has dogged us?"[TxU] The price an attentive eye (ear) pays is

its subjection to the immediate; it is attentive to it and vulnerable to it. *November 1932. Rapallo:* "One absorbs a fragment of somebody else's technique and in the process of absorbing it, something gets written, but whether that something is a poem or a technical exercise one cant tell—at least I cant—for some time." *April 1967. Goleta, California:* "While I am reading Pound Yeats and Eliot for one class and Williams, Zukofsky or David Jones for the other, I find I cant write a line which does not turn out to belong by right of rhythm or structure to one of these poets rather than to me, so that I've not had as much use for leisure as might be expected." The price of forced exile, teaching, is our loss. It is the very spareness and turbulent concreteness of his language; it is the astringency of his eye; it is his integrity and his refusal to compromise and his knowledge ("Nobody, it seems, has ever thought of setting Yeats' 'John Kinsella's Lament for Mrs Mary Moore' alongside of Juan Ruiz (archpriest of Hito)'s lament for Trotaconventos. They never cease to astonish me, these learned men, for they know so little"); it is what he reminds us we have lost; above all, it is his utter refusal to compromise that makes his death so sad. He distrusted splendour, the colossal (and therefore brutal), the magnificent: "Life is not all splendour," he said, and he denied, thereby, all euphemism. His favourite prose writers were Hume, Swift, Butler, Dickens; and his own prose, in hundreds of letters, in essays, in lectures, is amazingly clear. The bane of our age, he said, is our not "having to face what a man has made with deliberation and all his skill... . Every syllable you publish [of letters, biography, of casual utterance] will divert attention from the WORK."[TxU] Living is a difficult business, demands a tenacious eye.

He was one of the three great Northern poets. The other two are the Gawain poet, and Edmund Spenser.

BRIAN EDWARDS

# ALBERTA AND THE BUSH: THE DECONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN POSTMODERNIST CANADIAN AND AUSTRALIAN FICTION

Foucault's archaeological dig is an appropriate metaphor for the processes by which postmodernist fiction addresses the leading question of identity. Tracking the trace through a labyrinth of possibilities, negotiating not only winding tracery but layered depths, narcissistically self-conscious and a foregrounder of artifice, the writer of postmodernist fiction is historian come clean, an interdisciplinary artificer who makes play from indeterminacies and who, as Trickster, invites the reader into the process by acknowledging the gamesome nature of language and the impossibility of ending. Against Truth, therefore, stands multiplicity, against certainty the entrancing ways of indeterminacy. Dispossessed of the Kingdom of Absolute Authority, the postmodernist writer is not God but Dionysus and Coyote, a seductive dabbler in outrage, a rager, who (damned by awareness, which John Barth calls "exhaustion"[1] and Harold Bloom "the anxiety of influence"[2]) creates inter-texts acknowledging the layers of the site, this "tissue of quotations"[3] as Roland Barthes describes the text, necessarily granting power to the reader in the shared process of creating meanings.[4]

It is the case that, following Saussure's destabilisation of the sign and the deconstructive lessons of Derrida and Barthes, the death of God and radical interrogation of scientistic explanation, meaning constructions have been problematized. The epistemological barriers are down. And, as a construct that variously transcends the regional and historiacl mosaic from which it is composed, national identity survives under threat—caught always in a dialectic between vain quests for unity and acknowledgements of diversity, it is like Yeats's figure of the dancers and the dance moving apart and coming together, shaped by ideas of similarity and difference which simultaneously deconstruct and reconstruct its configurations. Subverted from "within" by regionalism (itself open to radical deconstruction) and from "beyond" by internationalism, it is challenged not only by change but by the metaphorical character of its medium, language.

If one were to conceive of national identity as a text, it would have, like all texts, spatial and temporal dimensions. Regarded spatially it is a construct fraught with the problematics of selection and gaps but its pretensions towards

Truth are really exposed temporally, as it is read and thereby created and recreated ad infinitum by subsequent readers or reading positions, a hermeneutic gamble where empiricist exercises can hardly turn up trumps.

If, as I am suggesting, the cards are, and should be, stacked against national identity freaks why do they/we play the game? In this paper I shall concentrate on examples from the work of two writers of fiction, Canadian Robert Kroetsch and Australian Murray Bail.

Attempting definitions of national identity is a perilous undertaking but the perils have not deterred the undertakers; to the contrary, we rise like fatalistic salmon. But is it true that the English picture Australia as "a land where the sun shines every day over gleaming surf beaches, a land of gorgeous bikini-clad women who are all sexually frustrated because their sun-bronzed men spend their free time drinking ice cold beer, or a land of hot deserts where noble savages hunt and roam,"[5] or, more seriously, that Canadians struggle to be English or French existing in a schizophrenic state of "between-ness"[6] against the threat to the south?

> 'What about Canadians? Have you ever met an interesting Canadian?'
>
> The comparisons, their anecdotes. Gerald pursed his lips.
>
> 'Yes, I'm not crazy about the Canadians.'
>
> 'I don't remember any,' Violet mysteriously cracked.[7]

Prescribing the nation to itself is a task often expected of fiction, as Robert Kroetsch acknowledges in this parody:

> Dear Novelist: Please make us feel at home. The naming. The domesticating. Margaret Laurence. Robert Davies. Mordecai Richler. The Prairie dweller. The Ontario WASP. The urban ethnic. Each in his nagging way names us into safety, into at-homeness. Versions of Genesis. A victory of humanism—when some of us are sceptical about the humanistic tradition. But home is always a place of quarreling—and a place of departures and returns.[8]

The sting is in the tail/tale. At best we are, or should be, ambivalent about the whole business, at once secure in the sense of shared identification *and* piqued by its suppression of local difference, for that is where the vitality is. The polite civility of an "at-home" soon becomes stultifying, inducing, indeed, the very break-out which its form has first masked. Although as Kroetsch says, there may be, via this act of naming, re-versions of Genesis, the postlapsarian world is too full of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and there are too many fruit-

eaters, for a Paradise Regained. The Prairie sod-buster is not, as Kroetsch's Johnnie Backstrom insists, one of the "big-money boys, the grabbers from the East. The high-muckie-mucks that never worked a day in their lives. Those high-muckie-muck gougers from Ontario that wouldn't know grade-one hard northern wheat from a bowl of corn flakes."[9] In postmodernist fiction the radical sense of difference in every way subverts the composure of similarity, of shared identity, and connections between the name and the named are too problematic for assurances about certain certainties.[10]

Kroetsch sees the task of exploring self and environment, for that is what national identity is, as one of un-naming, uncreating and uninventing:

> At one time I considered it the task of the Canadian writer to give names to his experience, to be the namer. I now suspect that, on the contrary, it is his task to unname.

and,

> In recent Canadian fiction the major writers resolve the paradox—the painful tension between appearance and authenticity—by the radical process of demythologizing the systems that threaten to define them. Or, more comprehensively, they uninvent the world.[11]

This process of uninvention is, of course, language-centered, and its operations are primarily evident in Kroetsch texts in artifice foregrounded, their self-reflexive acknowledgement of the processes of textual construction and the ambiguous status of the text vis-à-vis the world it only partly invokes and mainly creates. "I was constantly aware," he says, "that we both, and at once, record and invent these new places called Alberta and Saskatchewan."[12] The result is a prairie fiction which very deliberately deploys exaggeration, parody and farce in its deconstruction of this Canadian experience, using but transcending stereotypes of place and people and events. Kroetsch may use the "old dualities,"[13] Coyote-God, Self-Community, Energy-Stasis, Past-Present, East-West, Rural-Urban, but it is in ways that deconstruct the binaries showing not a neat mediation of structural antitheses but, rather, their arbitrariness and the gamesome ways in which they subvert and infiltrate one another. So, for example, in *The Words of My Roaring*, Johnnie Backstrom "six-four in my stockinged feet, or nearly so, a man consumed by high ambitions, pretty well hung, and famed as a heller with women" (p. 4) may be the picaresque hero deconstructed, volatile and voracious, a trickster figure of abounding energy and appetite; but he is also confessional and compassionate and only partly opposed to his binary opposite and political opponent, local physician Doc. Murdoch, who attended Johnnie's birth, loved his mother and so on. So many playful

connections! Studhorseman Hazard Lepage, of *The Studhorse Man*,[14] "damned coward frog" as his bathtub biographer Demeter Proudfoot calls him, expresses a phallic symbiosis with the stallion he leads about and not only collects bones and empty beer bottles as part of his mock epic quest but, "a man of inordinate lust" (p. 31), fulfils a role as living chaos versus history in his interlude with P. Cockburn (she the creator of life-sized wax figures) in a canopied four-poster bed in the provincial museum, watched over by her dead symbols of illustrious Albertans—three wax figures either side of the bed: an Indian chief, an early explorer, Mountie, missionary, early premier and a university president. As custodian of a Canadian national identikit, Cockburn would add a wax figure of this Studhorse man but, true to his name, Hazard eludes *that* commemoration in art. In *Gone Indian*,[15] Jeremy Sadness—"child of Manhattan" who "dreamed Northwest" (p. 6)—may track the frontier in a process of chaotic unmaking in Alberta, but its monitoring by lapsed westerner Prof. Mark Madham (and beyond the narrator by Kroetsch, beyond the text by all readers—so many frames) emphasises not only the equivocal romanticism of Jeremy's quest but its pastness. "Reconstructing" from Jeremy's tapes the discontinuous narrative as massive letter, Madham ("Mad-ham," or postlapsarian "Adam" ambivalent about what was lost in Eden) represents an antithetical frame of reference and another time-scale: the urban(e) cynicism of cosseted academic challenging and being challenged by Jeremy Sadness's plunge into the Canadiana of winter festival, forests and valley, ice and snow, a dream of death and re-creation. The frontier metaphor, the "far interior," becomes a site for unmaking of identity or, in the language of the text, "the consequence of the northern prairies to human definition [is] the diffusion of personalities into a complex of possibilities" (p. 152). What indeed, does the disappearance of Jeremy (named after Bentham) Sadness with Bea Sunderman (Earth Mother) into the northern landscape signify? Certainly Kroetsch as author has his cake and eats it too (and why not) by posing yet criticising for its pretentiousness the elaborate let-us-decreate-the-Fall scheme, a parody implicit, for example, in the titles Jeremy concocts for his lapsed thesis: "Going Down With Orpheus," "The Artist as Clown and Pornographer," "The Plot Against Plot," "The Terrors of Completion." Although the narrative implies a thesis not written but lived, while all the time it is of course written, it also undoes any meanings that construct might have. It would be a devil of a thesis to grade!

Artifice is foregrounded in each text, in the multi-directional play on names, the chaotic events of the comic quests and in the elaborate presentational processes—processes that emphasise play, discontinuity and fantasy. Although the texts variously create senses of place and lived experience, a prairie identity composed of farms and beer parlours, stampedes and festivals, snow and ice and

always the vast space of the landscape, these are also deconstructed in the aesthetics of artifice which is the process of their presentation.

It is in *Badlands*,[16] however, that Kroetsch's archaeological dig is most meaningful, the metaphor become literal while retaining its metaphorical suggestiveness. The William Dawe Expedition of 1916 into the Alberta badlands becomes the text in which the past, prehistory, is explored layer by geological layer as the male questers this time search for dinosaur bones, motivated by male pride and the possibility of fame. It is another quest where denials of woman and home are part of a ritual, both naturalistic and fantastic, central in the narrative and in the myths that transcend it. Kroetsch has frequently acknowledged Conrad's influence,[17] and the parallels between Marlow's quest into the Congo and Dawe's into the Badlands are obvious, one a reversal of the evolutionary development of "civilization" and the other an excursion through surface sediment and shale into the bone beds of geological eras. Journeys into interiors as into time, the river trips also suggest quests into the self, into the unconscious, a radical decomposition beyond history in search of origins, the "uncreation" about which Kroetsch writes in defining the Canadian writer's task.[18] Margaret Atwood has also noted in contemporary Canadian writing this tendency to excavate: "there is," she says, "a distinct archaeological motif in Canadian literature—unearthing the buried and forgotten past."[19]

> Moose Jaw, Sask. At a recent meeting here of the Saskatchewan Writer's Union Robert Kroetsch discussing Canadian writers' obsessive investigation of history, offered this comment: 'Fuck the past.' Some participants at the conference objected to his language.[20]

Commenting on this note, Ann Mandel points to the ambiguity of Kroetsch's remark: "It could be construed as a proposition for or against a necrophiliac literature,"[21] history as rejection or reincarnation of the wandering priapic hero of Kroetsch's fiction! But what explains this obsession with history? To what extent does the past define the present?

When Anna Dawe "recreates" the narrative of the Dawe expedition from her father's field notes, interleaving her own commentaries, the double narrative strategy enables Kroetsch to very profitably interweave time scales, present and subvert gender stereotypes, and consider influence, while creating a discontinuous text that confronts history and the whole question of identity upon which generalizations are made and shall founder. It is in this respect that *Badlands* deconstructs history as influence, providing a decreative process that, in Kroetsch's terms, permits individuality against stereotype (dancers against the dance of national identity). The recreative decreative process frees Anna Dawe

from the burden of her past, that of an absent father in a patriarchal social order. She commences:

> Why it was left to me to mediate the story I don't know: women are not supposed to have stories. We are supposed to sit at home, Penelopes to their wars and their sex. As my mother did. As I was doing. (p. 3)

and she answers Web's comment, "There is no such thing as a past," with "There is nothing else, Web" (p. 4). But ending in the vision of the grizzly bear dangling from a helicopter, ludicrous and impotent, comically human and male, above the source of the river of her father's 1916 expedition where she at last scatters the field notes (the tie), her quest symbolically frees her from the past—from the father, from the male.

William Dawe is presented as another wandering male, less phallic than Johnnie Backstrom, Hazard Lepage or Jeremy Sadness, and not as wild, but, like them, engaged in an ambiguous quest. Anna Dawe's deconstructive description of the male ritual defines a recurring theme not only in literature but in the identity question:

> Good God, how men do love their symbols. Each of them, every man, symbolic of another. Fugitive. From all the women in the world, no doubt. (p. 63)

It is the homo-erotic behaviour of males at hunting, fishing, drinking, swearing, athletics, story-telling and work (Kroetsch's list),[22] the male who circles the house warily, the house where the woman (desired and feared) waits. Although *Badlands* uses it, it also parodies the image of the male adventurer, Canadian as Frontiersman, not only by emphasising ambiguities in Dawe's expedition but by placing it within Anna Dawe's feminist critique and by transforming the Woman-Who-Waits (keeper of the hearth to which the Hero returns bearing trophies and tales) into the Woman-Who-Travels, the Female Quester, one of that half of society which definitions of national identity traditionally repress or ignore. The badlands of Southern Alberta may be a topographical reality and bonerushes an historical event but demythologizing the male story, history, his-story, Kroetsch's archaeological enterprise uncovers a site where, the past thrown off, the naming can begin again. "There are," says Anna Dawe, "no truths, only correspondences" (p. 45).

As an interrogator of inheritance, Kroetsch subjects the Canadian past to a deconstructive shaking by foregrounding the artifice of systems, language and narrative, those means by which identity is shaped. His fictions give life not to

fixed perceptions of national identity but to energy and change and possibility, to the decreative/recreative process itself.

In deconstructive play similar to the unmaking and uncreating processes in Kroetsch's work, Australian Murray Bail's story, "The Drover's Wife"[23] addresses that most tenacious myth central to discussions of Australian identity, the bush tradition. The story begins:

> There has perhaps been a mistake—but of no great importance—made in the denomination of this picture. The woman depicted is not 'The Drover's Wife.' She is my wife. We have not seen each other now ... it must be getting on thirty years. This portrait was painted shortly after she left—and had joined him. Notice she has very conveniently hidden her wedding hand. It is a canvas 20 x 24 inches, signed 1/r 'Russell Drysdale.'
>
> I say 'shortly after' because she has our small suit-case—Drysdale has made it look like a shopping bag—and she is wearing the sandshoes she normally wore to the beach. Besides, it is dated 1945.
>
> It is Hazel alright. (pp. 55-56)

Through Bail's story we read Drysdale's painting, reproduced in black and white as pictorial epigraph to the story, and its predecessor text Lawson's "The Drover's Wife," icon of Australiana with its version of nineteenth-century outback life and considerable responsibility in fixing identikits of the laconic Aussie wanderer, whose absence can't be helped, and the battling woman who waits. A proliferation of texts, of reading frames.

The parody is clever, deconstructing the earlier story by reversing the main props: whereas Lawson's female hero battles the odds and dreams of the city, Bail's Hazel has left the city for the bush—like Kroetsch's Jeremy Sadness, she has, by going drover, "gone Indian." "Gordon," Adelaide dentist, the speculative narrator as deserted male who minds the children, is bemused and no bush romantic. And the site of this archaeological dig is not so much Bail's urban male narrator/narrative as the intertext, the conjunction of a late nineteenth century story, a mannered Australian painting and the postmodernist text which incorporates them together with the abundant mythology of the bush/outback tradition which its parody evokes and challenges. What can be the currency of Lawson, Paterson and Rudd for ideas about national identity: literary cum historical curiosity or central inheritance and pervasive sub-stratum? At the very least, Bail's text problematizes the discussion and although one may wonder whether Hazel gone bush legitimates or subverts Henry Lawson's archetypal figure, its ironies mock the idea of *national* identity.

The play continues in the subversive semiotics of Bail's novel *Homesickness*. Its deconstructive procedure is immediately evident in the exaggerated heterogeneity of the band of thirteen Australian tourists abroad. Pointedly differentiated by name, status, interests, speech and sexual preference, they are eastern European, Italian, English, French and German, heterosexual and homosexual, hedonistic and ascetic, brash and introvert, humourless and the joker, but "Australian," a comic mosaic which eludes the "melting pot." Proliferating through the continent-hopping of their farcical grand tour, amazing Australian graffiti, "Australian" values and "Australian" artefacts and performances satirise national name-calling, treating the stereotyping as an absurd cultural construct while deploying language as a flexible instrument of play. So, for example, these museum hunters discover, tucked away in East Yorkshire, the "Corrugated Iron Museum," memorial to Australian "quality of life" (p. 114), where highlights amongst rare collectors' items are a corrugated iron dunny, and a corrugated iron violin on which the obliging English guide plays "Waltzing Matilda" and, as if to balance the imperial register, "God Save the Queen." In Africa the Museum of Handicrafts contains not artefacts of African culture but waste of western civilization—old lawn mowers, used toothpaste tubes, false teeth, a French cigarette-rolling machine, early TV, a soda-water syphon, clocks and plastic aeroplanes. A round-table discussion suggests that the French are "piggy to foreigners," the Yanks are "generous," the English are "nose in the air" but "miles better than the Irish," the Scots have no sense of humour, Poles "keep to themselves," the Spanish are "a marvellous people but could be better," the Dutch wear clogs but are clean, and "what about the Swedes then?"—"Socialism and suicides. Blue eyes. Volvos." The conclusion? "I keep saying, we're not bad the more you look around" (pp. 225-227). Self-consciously ridiculous, Bail's check-list satire demonstrates not only the absurdity of such caricatures of national identity but subverts as well the solipsism it might seem to promote. In vain search of self, the tourists' archaeological exercise takes them to Lady Pamela Hunt-Gibbons, expert in genealogy —"from the colonial back-blocks folk want to know their origins, and test the old soil" (p. 87); the minibus driver says "I'm always fetching Kiwis, bloody Aussies and Mapleleafs ..." (p. 87). But the text's archaeological exercise probes deeper, uncreating and unnaming, to use Kroetsch's language, affirming the futility of a search for origins as totalization or explanation and promoting indeterminacy by parody in its elaborate deconstruction of national identity.

National identity, then, may be described, in Foucault's terminology, as a "discursive formation."[24] There is something to talk about however problematic it can be demonstrated to be; there is no shortage of statements on the subject however fraught these are with gaps, limits and games; there is a carnival of possibilities and, as in carnivals, Lords of Misrule frequent the field, or at least it is so in postmodernist fiction. Despite the challenges of regionalism and inter-

nationalism, the pitfalls of reductive definition and the undeniable interplay of differences, the pursuit continues, always, as Derrida would say, "sous rasure."[25]

Is Canada "a kind of global Switzerland,"[26] as Northrop Frye has suggested, buoyant after a history of diffidence, and Australia, according to Jonathan King, a land of "waltzing materialism?"[27] Questioning older formations, each of these perspectives necessarily invites its own shaking apart. Whatever side of whichever fence one chooses, stereotypes should be challenged, and our postmodernist writers of fiction are in the fray choosing most mornings, as Robert Kroetsch says, to be not God but Coyote. Problematizing the field, the uncreating process promotes discourse and initiates new ideas about that which it deconstructs. A shape-shifter, then, national identity will continue to captivate attention as it slips away from attempts to nail it down.

NOTES

1. Barth's term for the condition of saturation or awareness, "all the stories have been told" that he sees troubling the contemporary writer. See John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," *Atlantic Monthly*, 220, No. 2, August 1967, pp. 29-34.

2. Defining "poetic misprision," Bloom discusses the anxiety experienced by poets as a result of the influence of "strong" poets, the tradition. Firmly centered on intertextuality, this theory views every text as an intertext and influence as inescapable. See *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) and *A Map of Misreading* (New York: University Press, 1975).

3. Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author," in *Image, Music Text*, Tr. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 148.

4. Although "reader response" theories share destabilization of the authority of the author and the printed text itself, they are indeed various. Some of this variety may be seen in two recent anthologies: Jane P. Tompkins (ed.), *Reader-Response Criticism, From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) and Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (ed.), *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

5. Geoffrey Barker, writing from the London Bureau of "The Age" quoted in Jonathan King, *Waltzing Materialism* (London: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 5.

6. The expression is Marshall McLuhan's in his discussion of Canada as "a land of multiple boundaries, psychic, social and geographic." See McLuhan, "Canada: The Borderline Case," in David Staines (ed.), *The Canadian Imagination: Dimensions of a Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 226-248.

7. Murray Bail, *Homesickness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 225.

8. Robert Kroetsch, "Contemporary Standards in the Canadian Novel," from a paper delivered to a conference in Calgary, February 1978, with this same title and reprinted in *Robert Kroetsch: Essays* edited by Frank Davey and bpNichol (*Open Letter*, Spring 1983, Fifth Series, No. 4), p. 43.

9. Robert Kroetsch, *The Days of My Roaring* (London: Macmillan, 1966), p. 110.

10. The perception is a commonplace in post-Saussurean discussion, and central in Kroetsch's comments on literature and writing. See, for example, Geoff Hancock, "An Interview with Robert Kroetsch" in *Canadian Fiction Magazine* (Spring/Summer 1977) 24/25, pp. 33-52; Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1982), pp. 141-142; "On Being an Alberta Writer," in *Robert Kroetsch: Essays*, p. 71.

11. Robert Kroetsch, "Unhiding the Hidden: Recent Canadian Fiction," *Journal of Canadian Fiction* (1974) III, 3, p. 43 and reprinted in *Robert Kroetsch: Essays*, pp. 17-22.

12. "On Being an Alberta Writer," p. 75.

13. Kroetsch deploys this structuralist perception and patterning in his novels and discusses it in essays. Increasingly, however, he displays in discussion the post-structuralist dismantling of the binaries that the works of fiction, it could be said, must always also practice. See, for example, *Labyrinths of Voice*, pp. 142, 176, 186.

14. Robert Kroetsch, *The Studhorse Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970), reprinted Markham, Ontario: Paperjacks, 1977. Page references are to the Paperjacks edition.

15. Robert Kroetsch, *Gone Indian* (Toronto: New Press, 1973).

16. Robert Kroetsch, *Badlands* (Toronto: New Press, 1975), reprinted Toronto: General Paperbacks, 1982. Page references are to the Paperbacks edition.

17. See, for example, *Labyrinths of Voice*, pp. 12-13, 22.

18. See, "Unhiding the Hidden," and Robert Kroetsch, "Beyond Nationalism: A Prologue" in *Mosaic* (Spring 1981), XIV, 2, pp. v-xi. Both reprinted in *Robert Kroetsch: Essays.*

19. Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1972), p. 112.

20. Quoted in Ann Mandel, "Uninventing Structures: Cultural Criticism and the Novels of Robert Kroetsch," in *Open Letter*, (Spring 1978), 3, 8, p. 54.

21. "Uninventing Structures," p. 54.

22. And Kroetsch discusses the gender separations in "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space," in *Robert Kroetsch: Essays.*

23. Murray Bail, "The Drover's Wife," in *Contemporary Portraits* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1975).

24. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Tr. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), pp. 31-39.

25. This is the state of things, according to Derrida, once God, History, Author, Truth, the Word are removed as the guarantees of definitive single meaning: "The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification 'ad infinitum'." (Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" in *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), p. 249.

26. Northrop Frye, "Conclusion" in *Literary History of Canada Canadian Literature in English*, ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 2nd edition, vol. III, p. 328.

27. Title of King's study of Australian identity and culture, a satirical comparison of the "real" with the "mythical." See note 5.

LYN HEJINIAN

# LANGUAGE AND 'PARADISE'

My writing has almost never taken the form of a single entity. When I finished *The Guard*, I began a notebook project, something of an exegesis, and amplification, and adjustment, and extension of the trajectory of the poem. The notebook is labelled *Language & 'Paradise,'* which are the last two words of the poem. In this notebook, I've been writing a commentary on the poem, sentence by sentence. This takes into account my sense that the subject of the poem shifts and differs sentence by sentence, but it doesn't take into account the effect of the line on these sentences.

I have an imprecise vocabulary for talking to myself about the metaphysics of my work, but I'll tell you what it is. I think the central issue of *The Guard* is phenomenological, in the sense that the phenomenological situation includes perceiver, perception (or perceiving), perceived, and the various meanings of their relationships, which are not at all mild. When I say the perceived, I mean not only objects, but events, emotions, ideas, and the various interconnections existing in the world. I assume the reality of everything. Thus, if I can say that the poem includes the perceived, it may include sentences, for example, about desire, various domestic and professional events, political opinion, and the fear of death, as well as a good deal of description. When I say perception, since I am thinking about a poem, I locate (just as I in fact experience) the site of the perceiving in language itself. It is here that the interplay between line and sentence is the most important. As I see it, and this is partially in retrospect (which I mention because I want to make clear that I learned most of these things by writing the poem, not in preparation for it, and that this perceiving from within the writing is a central element of my practical poetics, as well as of its metaphysics; it provides me with the necessity for writing), if the sentence represents the entirety of a perception, a complete thought, then the line might be taken to represent the shape or the scale or measure of our consciousness of it. A perception might come at one in segments, as planes, and the line represents such a plane, a unit of consciousness. Thus each line is an aspect of an idea or observation or feeling. When one sentence ends and another sentence begins in a single line, then the connection between the two is part of the plane of consciousness. This may sound slightly abstract, but it is actually only a

very simple way to read lines. For example, the third line of *The Guard* is one complete sentence, followed by just one word of the next sentence: "The full moon falls on the first. I." The connection between "first" and "I" is obvious, and also somewhat funny, I think. I indicate that when the poem begins with the question, "Can one take captives by writing," this one is I. (A similar construction occurs in my poem *The Green*, in the sentence: "In the sentence 'one left the sunny corner bedroom, crossed an open hallway that was waste space as large as a room but unfurnished and without doors, turned at the newel post and descended on stairs that reached one landing after seven steps and another after fifteen,' I am the one.")

The rhythmic element in the poem is something I am often thinking about when I write, and not solely as an aesthetic quality—as part of the poem's grace or beauty, say, in one place, or its clumsiness and irritability in another. When I am writing, to the extent that it is equivalent to thinking, I am doing so with a certain rhythm of attention. And there is another area which perhaps only rhythm can consider, and that is the conflict between time and space which is the other central theme of *The Guard*.

Some of my thoughts about rhythm in poetry—the rhythm of the sentence and the counter-rhythm of the line and the significance of the conflict and interplay between them—is merely an extension of ideas expressed by Osip Brik in an essay entitled "Contributions to the Study of Verse Language":

> Verse is not regulated simply by the laws of syntax, but by the laws of rhythmic syntax, that is, a syntax in which the usual syntactic laws are complicated by rhythmic requirements.
>
> The primary word combination in poetry is the line. The words in a line have been combined according to a definite rhythmic law and, simultaneously, according to the laws of prose syntax. The very fact that a certain number of words coexist with the two sets of laws constitutes the peculiarity of poetry. In the line, we have the results of a rhythmico-syntactic word combination. (Matejka and Pomorska, *Readings in Russian Poetics*, p. 122.)

One might not agree that "the primary word combination in poetry is the line," since some of us are writing poetry that doesn't use lines, or in which lines have been transmuted into paragraphs. And Osip Brik is assuming a poetry of regular metrics and a language where the prose syntax is very definite and is evident not in word order but in the words themselves, which have different forms depending on whether they are the subject or the direct object or the indirect object or the object of a preposition in the sentence, etc. Nonetheless, it seems to me that I could extrapolate the meaning, if not the details, of this idea and apply it to my own work.

The counterpoint between line and sentence establishes two series of durations. And without equating the sentence with space and the line with time, it still seemed to me that in *The Guard*, where the writing includes an aesthetic (and therefore psychological) struggle between the two, it was desirable to use a form that was rhythmically complicated. I wanted to set the work in motion against itself, so to speak, to establish the inward concentricity, the pressure, the implosive momentum that stands for the conflict between time and space in the poem.

As for the position of the perceiver in the phenomenological situation—or in the poem, a poem—it is a person, and the subject of the work I am working on now called *The Person*. I was already thinking about the perceiver, however, when I was writing *The Guard*, although the emphasis there is on the middle term, perceiving. It seemed to me even in *The Guard* that to understand the person, as a perceiver, one had to take into account the dynamics of individual psychology, personal history, the influence of class background and an individual's attempt to challenge it, and so forth. Especially, one had to consider the language in which all of this social matter is situated. To cite only a simple and raw instance:

> I and my musician friend very love the jazz
> music and very many study if listen your saxophone
> quartet playing, therefore request
> your if no expensive so if would such
> dear send me some jazz records

This is an unaltered extract from a letter to my husband, who is himself a musician, from a man in Czechoslovakia, who signs his letters sometimes Fan Boy and sometimes Jazz Boy. I liked the passage because it has already a natural bebop rhythm and therefore is what it is about, a jazz letter. Of course, as an analysis of the perceiver, it is very primitive, since it is merely quoting. I included a similar type of quotation in the second part of the poem, where I include part of a column in the *San Francisco Chronicle* called "The Question Man." This particular day's question was, "What is the dirtiest room in your house?"

> The kitchen: everyone eats
> in different cycles—yeh
> the dishes are all over the counter ...
> yeh, food's left out, things are on the stove
> yeh, the floor's filthy—that's amazing!
> have you been here before?

There are several things happening here, but I can point out in this context that we hear the voice of the housewife, and thus, from my point of view, it represents material from the work place.

I'm going to read various passages from the notebook about *The Guard*, but not in sequence. I am not taking the sentences in the order in which they appear in the poem. I pulled these particular pages out of the notebook and arranged them in an order that might suggest several constellations of meaning in the work. The notebook has become the site, so to speak, for writing about my poetics, and it is an on-going project.

But this brings up another issue. There are quite a number of lines in *The Person* that come from my comments about *The Guard*, and thus, to that extent, material for the present project is generated by the previous one. *The Guard*, in terms of *The Person*, is unfinished. In fact, as a matter of necessity, and as the reflection of a basic observation about the condition of things, I won't regard any of my work as finished. I don't want to resist the book, but it is an extremely problematic entity if it implies a finished work.

I say this in order to give an indication of my method, which always finds itself beginning in the middle. And in saying so, I am both reflecting on Carla Harryman's work called *The Middle* and echoing a line from the first Canto of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the Canto which was the source of the original impulse for *The Guard*. I began writing the poem propelled by the charged aporia that is essential lyricism, and in which Dante finds himself, biographically ("Midway this way of life we're bound upon, I woke to find myself ...") and poetically ("I gained such good, that, to convey The tale, I'll write what else I found"). The landscape proposed by 'paradise' seemed to represent a horizontal or spatial sense of time, eternity being that moment when time is transmuted into space. And the significance of the figure of Virgil, whom Dante calls "my author" and who personifies Poetry, is that he promises to guide Dante to 'paradise'.

The relationship of language to 'paradise' seemed to propose a relationship of time to space, and to posit a form.

> If the world is round & the gates are gone... .
> The landscape is a moment of time
> that has gotten in position.

Here I began to wonder about the nature of consciousness, and to regard consciousness itself as form, and form as a middle.

* * *

> *The tree*
> *stands up aching in the sun.* (part 1)

This entire section of the poem throws time into space, until "The sky was packed // which by appearing endless seems inevitable."

When I was in high school I read novels, and the one I liked best and by instinct was *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*. The work was for me at the time more revelatory than comprehensible, perhaps. The first thing I liked was that in order to begin (and it is typically adolescent to think obsessively about beginning), Laurence Sterne had to go to the middle and remain there. This may be a characteristic of thought which is habitually concrete rather than habitually abstract. The physical analogy would be with moving objects around or travel, both of which displace the middle while at the same time containing everything within its range and on its terms. And this all has to do with an experience of space and of time.

In thinking about time and space, I'm thinking about the non-isolability of objects and events in the world, our experience of them, and our experience of that experience. In phenomenological terms, I am assuming realness in the world and focussing on the nature of perception, when language is the site of that consciousness—or, more specifically, when a poem is the site of that consciousness.

I say *poem*, because I'm thinking about art—artistic work. When the temporal dominates in a work, it exerts a particular pressure (hence the tree's "aching in the sun"), and one's response is likely to include restlessness, and sometimes anxiety. It challenges the span of the self, and for that reason the work incites one to activity. Whereas, when the spatial dominates the work, the experience of the work may include a sense of calm. Landscape is reassuring, "Like the wind that by its bulk inspires confidence." The temporal press and spatial reassurance are both desirable aesthetic effects, but very different. At the end of *The Guard*, I say it is the difference between language and 'paradise.'

* * *

*Paradise encouraged cuppings.* (part 7)

Meanwhile, in section 7, I notice that the fragility of sequence increases the palpability of things.

"The exact finish bristles (those clouds / intend thunder)."
"The antennae of sex."
"Morning buzzes and purrs in wide erasures."
"Aluminums knock against the enamel sink."
"Ear, the already-hollow, mouthpiece."

"Perfection defeats the world // for inspection. There's poem / with
anything in it."

And so forth. This palpability of things has, for me, both metaphysical and aesthetic force. It is both philosophical and physical.

It is in this context that I am drawn to the materiality of poetry.

When I first began to write, in seventh grade, I planned to write a novel, because novels require a lot of paper and typing. Instead, as it turned out, I wrote an introduction, which was, however, very long and satisfied for a time my desire for paper and typing. This writing, though it was the introduction and not the fiction, nonetheless was full of symbolism and contained a description of "Eden" (which is not to be confused with 'paradise'). I elaborated on the beginning of the novel, which never existed, and I said that I found myself a perpetual participant of the middle—or, as I put it, "I find myself in medias res."

Meanwhile the English teacher said, "If you want to describe Eden, you can't say velvet grass, because royalty and interiors didn't then yet exist. Your adjectives must have reference to your material."

* * *

*The tongue*
*becomes observant the tongue gets tough*
*inevitably, like a fruitskin.* (part 6)

Modern physiology must take into account the things that persons perceive.

"The tongue becomes observant and the tongue gets tough" concerns the relationship of the body to perception, and more specifically of the mouth to the languages of expression and description. It is, for example, one thing to say that the horses are galloping and another to push and pull air bubbles with the tongue against the roof of the mouth rapidly in a specific rhythm perceived to resemble the hoofbeats on the road.

As Merleau-Ponty says, "In trying to describe the phenomenon of speech and the specific act of meaning, we shall have the opportunity to leave behind us, once and for all, the traditional subject-object dichotomy" (*The Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 174).

In this case, language is not a form of mediation, but im-mediate; the word peach bears the same relationship to the object as the object does to the word. It is not so much a matter of equivalence as of reciprocity. Persistence reverses the insistent pursuit. The resulting vibration of this reversible movement, however, is unstable. (This instability is one of the central factors in *The Person.*) For example, the whole of the passage which includes this line (the beginning of the

6th part of *The Guard)* sets time in space to a static transition, jiggling. The condition I imagine is more geographic than spatial, the parameters measured longitudinally or latitudinally. The shift is shaken by the hunger of restlessness, and then the stasis is restored again momentarily in the materiality of the writing itself.

Loosely a bullfrog exits a pond.
My heart did suck ... to fidget, soothed
... by seawater, restless ... against
the unplugged phone. Arfing up the street
in a rainstorm as a rose
with ardent jiggling stands. A jackhammer
shatters the pavement—was this repression
radiant with static and a single dog.

However the lawnmower is idling
outdoors ... it is like slowly throwing oneself
... as if simply to walk into arms ... so much
restlessness because one is hungry. The tongue
becomes observant and the tongue gets tough
inevitably, like a fruitskin. Now it migrates
(I hear the pen pat as I come to the end
of the phrase and make a comma) in G-minor.

* * *

*Loosely a bullfrog exits a pond.* (part 6)

This line is almost descriptive. I say 'almost' because elements in the sentence are burdened with the choices made in its composition. "Loosely" for example is emphatic because it comes first. It is the gear in which the verb drives the noun. "Exits" is more literary than literal—the word "exit" is formal, even structural. One exits through the functional element; this is the reductive case of the door for people, of the pond for the frog.

* * *

*We take up*
*an unconventional position between two posts*
*(whenever I hear "opposition" I vomit).* (part 6)

Between public and private is the difference between language and thought, or should be unless the difference breaks down or is overcome by a hypothetical ecstasy that postpones mediation. This has to do with the gap between mind and body. Few things are as surprising, incredible, as the actual physical existence of anything, when its moment, so to speak, has arrived. The infant at two months discovers and accepts its hands, but there are, usually unlasting, times, later, when the person, shocked, rejects them. At those times it seems perhaps preferable to be unreal, although in our anxiety we continue to struggle to become real.

To stress a false dichotomy ("whenever I hear 'opposition' I vomit"), sometimes one wants to be real as a body and sometimes as a mind. In either case, one is sustained by resemblance, by the conjunctive and comparative which are forms of number.

The parenthetical comment is from a letter from the poet Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, to whom *The Guard* is dedicated, writing from Leningrad:

> But about this subject, the hatred and love (I vomit when I come across the word 'opposition') of the things and names given to the poet to comprehend—he destroys the connection ... he struggles in his creation of appropriate places for everything and everybody... . But the language of meanings (definitions)—in spite of numerous formulas—becomes something Roman, moving toward myth, crossing the boundaries but not finding its destiny ... I foresee going ahead of language into the high world where vision, hearing, memory, the body are not the first, the second, nor third, element, no longer need time nor space, nor God, because they are not within *this* framework, within *this* condition. There is "the sadness of language."

* * *

*The twitching of number*
*in what would have been vacancy.* (part 4)

Time is the violent element that makes space appear irrational. Is this accurate?

Numbers resemble prepositional phrases more than the adjectives or nouns they are, since in themselves they express relational concepts: with, after, beside, beyond, inside, including, among, before, by means of, together with, after, excluding, and so on as well as preposition-like constructions such as more and less than.

Like the preposition, number refers to its frame of reference at the same time that it is specific within the frame, to the whole as well as to the part.

Beyond this, number is more oxymoronic than symbolic. As an oxymoron, that is a compact, summarized, paradoxical, resolved but unstable, elementary contradiction (like "sweet pain," "audible silence," etc.) number is implosive, and more ebullient than oppositional.

> Oxymoron ... reveals a compulsion to fuse all experience into a unity.... (*Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*)

* * *

> *Can people take captives by writing ...*
> (first line of *The Guard*)

Here, as Dante says, "I turn the face of my words towards the poem itself, and address it." (Later I vary his very words: "The windows resort / to equivalence as spring to cruelty / with evenly-hovering attention, and turn / the face of its words to me / just as water melts in the fire.")

The word "captives" refers to several things. First, and most important, to capturing the world in words. I want to explain to myself the nature of the desire to do so, and I wonder aloud if it is possible. The poem opens with a challenge to the poem itself and raises the lyric dilemma.

Various responses (it would be inaccurate to call them answers) occur throughout the poem. For example:

> ... It's
> as if I were seeing myself
> propped on my hand, with ...
> putting something loud in the mouth ...
> an egg, an arena
>
> at the sun ... the top
> is elegant, and ... from a distance
> and found ... it's devoutly boosting
> ... in the nighttime resistance ...
> the littler splendor of the snow, the line of sight
> bending in that direction in order to predict
> ... what happens to it when we're alone?
>
> and all that I undreamt of ...
> but I'm not looking for a reason to complain
> ... the bottom is devout, the fog burns off
> clouds blow over, blue skies reach up

everything is out ... or predicate an out-of-doors
... it's soul voyeurism ... your *own censor*
has passed you! ... he's such a sunny person

with the other arm ... after all
romantic love proves out ... adept at gathering
... loses some of its power
but I don't know what he sees. (part 5)

I intended this brief essay on consciousness and language to include a small charge of eroticism, suggestive of the appetite of consciousness for language. This is not solely metaphorical.

One may read the passage as ecstatic or one may read it as anxious. If anxious, then one may consider the anxiety as basic to a consideration of the relationship of language to perception.

This relationship assumes the reality and relevance of the world (which in another context is basic to the social (political) commitment or attachment of the poem). Phenomenology, says Merleau-Ponty,

> is also a philosophy for which the world is always 'already there' before reflection begins—as an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status. It is the search for a philosophy which shall be a 'rigorous science,' but it also offers an account of space, time and the world as we 'live' them. It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is. (Preface to *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p. vii.)

* * *

*We will never know a true confession.* (part 2)

Earlier in this same stanza occurs this sentence: "The urge to tell the truth is strong."

A confession is a complication of the desire to tell. Such desire is a recurrent theme of *The Guard*, and it almost couldn't be otherwise. "The open mouths of people are yellow & red." In the first stanza of the poem people are described as if inflamed with an appetite for speech. The colors are those of industrial fires and of a ripe peach.

The desire to tell is an effect of language itself on the psyche, which is, then, part of a linguistic trajectory. As I wrote elsewhere (*Poetics Journal* 4, p. 139), "Language is one of the forms our curiosity takes. It makes us restless."

Such restlessness, appearing in the form of hunger, eroticism, and persistent movement, prevails in the poem. "I could only get comfortable by walking" and "it is like slowly throwing oneself / ... as if simply to walk into arms ... so much restlessness because one is hungry. The tongue becomes observant and the tongue gets though / inevitably, like a fruitskin."

The desire to tell is also indicative of a particular relationship with the social and with time. With regard to the latter, it is possible that the restlessness which desire manifests is aimed ultimately at overcoming time. To tell is a form of accumulation. It has the potential to reverse the order of events, or to implode a sequence infinitely, as in the picture of the person holding the picture of the person holding the picture, etc. "They have achieved the inability to finish what they say."

The desire to tell is an insistent pursuit.

But the line, "We will never know a true confession," also represents the imposition of the confession on reality. The confession attempts to relieve the related narrative of meaning, so that only the materials are left: pure aesthetics. The model is a conversation with an omniscient listener—one who, by definition, in being omnisicient, is the original knower of the narrative, and who knows—all at once as a single thing—what the narrator must think of as the beginning, middle, and end.

A confession is a particular kind of narrative, one in which the relationship to time is formulated as a sense of guilt. Guilt, remorse, and various other forms of anxiety are part of a temporal psychology, a sense of sequence and consequence without lateral possibility. The confession is an attempt to sidestep this.

Later in the poem, the desire to tell comes into conflict with education, in the line, "'I'm dancing on the inside!'—'Don't show off!'"

* * *

> *My heart did suck ... to fidget, soothed*
> *... by seawater, restless ... against*
> *the unplugged phone.* (part 6)

This is the second sentence of part 6, and it follows the sentence, "Loosely a bullfrog exits a pond."

This part of the poem is mostly about the erotic—sex, hunger, restless intellectual and emotional urges, aesthetic passions, etc., when they are felt in the body, when they seem to be lodged in the heart or stomach or liver. A less irritable view of this same scene appears in the first part of the poem: "Such air" (i.e., the weather and air that is drawn to us in the first stanza of the poem) "always flies to the heart and liver, faces nature / with its changing pan, floating

boats on the bay / far from authority, sent truly / speaking in little weights" and so on.

Lyricism—the lyric impulse, or the desire to write, as I feel it—is interior to the conjunction of eros and language, and that is the abstraction which this section of the poem fills.

"My heart did suck"—refers to yearning. In this phrase also I am comparing the heart to a bullfrog. The bullfrog lives in a membrane, its skin, and resembles the heart, the kidney, or a lung. The bullfrog is like an organ. Elsewhere I refer to the skin's containing endlessness and the skin's containing character—organs, too.

The two middle terms ("to fidget, soothed ... by seawater, restless") represent a minor conflict between space and time, when a dissatisfied person is jostled by their collision.

The telephone, as the organ of interruption, increases the tension—or would if it weren't unplugged. Elsewhere I wrote, "The telephone is a weapon." Interruption is endemic to experience, and violent.

This is not the first appearance of ellipses. The first line of the poem ends with three dots. There they simply adjust the trajectory of a thought. The thought rebounds as if it were a light image hitting a screen—such a screen as renders films for viewing or photos for printing, in which case they resemble journalistic dots: "your *own censor* has passed you!"

As the poem proceeds, it accumulates these dots. Between them the poem pushes, not at the outer boundaries of language and expression but through their substance, through the substance of articulate thought.

They function within a sentence as another rhythmic element, a correlary to the line break, and like the line break they discontinue a sentence without closing it. They postpone the realization of the extendability of the thought. They represent, in this sense, the discontinuity of consciousness within a pattern of recurrence.

As Bob Perelman says in his poem "Days":

> In fact you don't
> Live a life one
> Day at a time.
> Some days you skip.
> Come back to them
> Later, others never occur.

Having experienced consciousness as discontinuous, I am forced to disagree with William James's characterization of consciousness as a continuum, what he calls "a stream of consciousness," and I feel encouraged to disagree because his own analysis of language (at least of sentences) as the model and the medium for

perception contradicts the metaphor. Consciousness more closely resembles a stack or pile, in which sentences or parts of sentences are the plates or potentially vast planes in a pile, banking frontally.

> If anyone asks what is the mind's object when you say 'Columbus discovered America in 1492,' most people will reply 'Columbus' or 'America,' or, at most, 'the discovery of America.' They will name a substantive kernel or nucleus of the consciousness, and say the thought is 'about' that.... But the *Object* of your thought is really its entire content or deliverance, neither more no less. It is a vicious use of speech to take out a substantive kernel from its content and call that its object; and it is an equally vicious use of speech to add a substantive kernel not articulately included in its content, and to call that its object.... The object of my thought in the previous sentence, for example, is strictly speaking neither Columbus nor America, nor its discovery. It is nothing short of the entire sentence, 'Columbus-discovered-America-in-1492.' And if we wish to speak of it substantively, we must make a substantive of it by writing it out thus with hyphens between all its words. Nothing but this can possibly name its delicate idiosyncrasy. (William James, *Principles of Psychology*, I, p. 275-76)

I can imagine perceptual literacy, of which a poem is a model, as an experience of a series of verbal planes; the lines of a poem are characteristic forms of units of consciousness.

The desire to be literate beyond the terms of a discontinuous consciousness (or, the obverse of this, to be conscious beyond the limits of the verbal plane) may constitute the cathectic situation of the poem. The lyric impulse appears to seek to extend the continuity of consciousness.

In *The Guard*, I am forced to set the discontinuity of consciousness against the continuity of reality—always recognizing the independence of reality.

I continue to think about this in *The Person*, where one line says "Self-consciousness is discontinuous":

> There is no time
> for rewriting
> my thoughts
> are in my neck
> Self-consciousness is discontinuous
> The very word "diary" embarrasses me
> There are schools of autobiography
> far removed—into them

too, socialism hums
as mercury, spilled, splits
and is solid
The head is a case, with genitals
I laugh because things fit
This is the solace of fatalism
I distinguish it from non-literary reality
Anything that decomposes
rather than a person
into temporal rather than spatial parts
must be a person's life

And so on. In this part of *The Person*, the discontinuity of consciousness is felt as a pressure exerted by time. The last sentence means, among other things, that part of the anxiety elicited by the temporal is a fear of death.

But imagine addressing 'paradise' without a fear of death. The end of the first part of *The Guard* says:

The silence of the sensible horizon is intelligibly
awkward. The skin containing character.
Some things slip through the mesh
and others go rotten. Nothing
distresses me exactly.
I sleep with self-styled procrastination.
Whose next day I don't know personally.

* * *

*They too live half in a shoe.* (part 2)

This is an anxious moment.

There is more to the sentence, but just this much of it forms a single line placed at the end of a stanza, so that it is suspended. Two stanzas later the next step is taken: "And the other half in a shoe too." This line too occurs as the last line of a stanza, and it too is only the beginning of a longer sentence.

The two sentences are: "They too live half in a shoe / given to reticent outbursts / with something by heart not forgotten / but not unkindly refraining something" and "And the other half in a shoe too / inclined to agree, committed to paper, sensuous with superstition."

There is a degree of parallelism here, but not identity. The poem is proceeding in the form of alternating planes. Just prior to this I say, "My shadow fell / in the weedlot, parallel to world a ... ."

* * *

*You match your chair.* (part 1)

To me, this is funny.

I think it was Bob Perelman who made such a comment to me one afternoon at San Francisco State, where we were sitting waiting for Carla Harryman and Alan Davies to give a reading, in the room where readings are always given there, which is gray and purple. As it turned out, almost everyone I knew in the room was wearing some shade of purple, and we all matched our chairs.

The concept of the match exceeds symmetry, which calls attention to the middle. What if one did indeed 'match' one's chair? What if one met other things with perfect (or hysterical) identity—in an unmediated, beatitudinous continuum?

Earlier I had been thinking about descriptive vocabularies, and about words as they match their things. But this sentence is about the odd vibration between one thing and another that is characteristic of funniness, or of the seriously comic.

Yurii Tynjanov, in *The Problem of Verse Language*, identifies three poetic signs: the principal sign (a word's primary meaning in its given context); the secondary sign (connotative nuances and 'semantic overtones'); and the oscillating sign (where two principal signs jostle for primacy, as in the pun). The comic employs oscillating signs.

The comic is only possible when one thing is seen in the light of another, when one thinks of two things at once. I, often being of two minds about things, laugh. "I laugh because things fit."

Conventionally it is said that the comic derives from disharmony, the unlikely, incongruous, or grotesque. But it may also be the result of the likely—which is what I mean by the 'match' or 'fit.' Perfect congruity is hilarious, as when event coincides with expectation.

In part 6, the passage which repeats what some animals and things 'say', half-translated and half-transliterated from a letter to me from Arkadii Dragomoshchenko in Russian, represents the construction of a comic stack and includes a certain amount of slippage.

> ... I tell you that cats 'say' mya-ew, mya-ew
> dogs gav-gav, trains sheex-sheex-sheekh
> (while whistling ta-tooo), roosters cry
> coo-caw-reh-coo, frogs croak kva-kva, birds
> in a flock sing fyou-eet, except ravens

which prefer karr-karrs, and the ducks quack kra
bells ring bom-bomm, and pigs grunt hryou-hryou
... but now, what is going on
with the neighbors through the wall?—not a sound
comes through—just as sometimes ... nothing can pass
through my skull, for example!

* * *

*Mercy is psychological.... But justice is scientific.*
(part 4)

Statements such as this are arrived at through intuited necessity, which is itself a form of extreme logic.

"When did you decide to be avant-garde?" This question was asked me by a student in a class to which I was speaking. There was no such decision (was my respectful answer to the ludicrous question), but only intuited necessity. And where there is no reason, no cause, but only necessity, then there is no moment.

* * *

*It takes a very normal person to create a new picture.*
(part 4)

This person revels in its education, to the degree that the education is afflicted with details. By that I mean that, in the general excitement, everything is repeatedly new, if not in itself, then in its composition. Its non-isolability restores and guarantees its newness. This is what I mean in the second part of the poem, where I say, "So sociable the influence of Vuillard" (I was thinking of the painted backgrounds), "so undying in disorder is order."

After writing this, I had a dream, in which the poem was subjected to analysis as if it were a human mind. All that had been written was separated into logical units (that's what they were called in the dream)—words, phrases, occasionally entire sentences, all units of consciousness—and these were divided algebraically by the letter N, which stood for a unit of normalcy. This fraction (poetic unit over unit of normalcy) equalled in my dream what was called Imagination. Poetry divided by normalcy is imagination. The equation was $\frac{\text{poem unit}}{N}$ = Imagination.

> Now, in the imagination, all flesh, all human flesh has been dead upon the earth for ten million, billion years... .
>
> Every step once taken in the first advance of the human race, from the amoeba to the highest type of intelligence, has been duplicated, every step exactly paralleling the one that preceded it the dead ages gone by. A perfect plagiarism results. Everything is and is new. Only the imagination is undeceived... .
>
> Yes, the imagination, drunk with prohibitions, has destroyed and recreated everything afresh in the likeness of that which it was... .
>
> (William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*, p. 93.)

This is the new picture, such as that which a very normal person makes. It captures the world.

BOB PERELMAN

# NOTES ON *THE FIRST WORLD*

In a perceptive & friendly review of *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* in *Poetics Journal* 5, David Lloyd characterized language-writing as an assault on grammar, referentiality, and narrative. Now you can only assault something that you're separate from. But as a writer I feel that I'm made up of grammar, referentiality, and narrative. If I look for language, in its pure state, "as such," it's in vain.

I don't find language, and I don't find the person. Instead I find monetary exchanges, buildings with price tags on them, plumbing, shampoo habits, in a word: history, not the abstraction, not the story, but a history made of acts & things. The absolute inwardness of the person is a chimera, based on ignoring certain details, like where hot water comes from.

CLIFF NOTES: LEMMING MUSIC

Because the languages are enclosed and heated
each one private a separate way
of undressing in front of the word window
faces squashing up against it
city trees and personal rituals of sanitation
washing the body free of any monetary transaction

Just like people, words in isolation develop delusions of grandeur, utopian hopes and pretensions get attached to them. Language, body, senses, act. The Formalists spoke of "laying bare the device." I think that what I'm laying bare is the idea of "laying bare." There are no simple "devices" to reveal, no pure language, or unmediated senses, or pure acts. I don't write language, or work with words, instead I find these thick social strands, multiplex hunks of rhetoric—I'm talking about "single words" and on up here—material & historical, tangled, attached ...

The parts of the machine take off their words and die away
in a description read to the senses
by the leftovers on TV that no one would think of eating

even in the very act of swallowing.

The would-be pure semiotician has already ingested Ed McMahon, Barbara Walters.

So, here, the senses are a contradiction: natural & semiotic. The body is private warm clean flesh and part of the social machine. Languages are the walls of privacy, erotic stripteases, voyeuristic windows.

I don't think writing will *solve* any of the contradictions of our civilization. But I do want it to make them more compact and obvious. So I can't say, like Ginsberg did almost 20 years ago, "I here declare the end of war!" There's a lot of war going on. Not that I don't admire parts of "Wichita Vortex Sutra" very much, I do, but I don't want to go all the way into the utopian fishbowl of language as pure, magic act.

> It's these "very acts" that we must
> Pay attention to the flatness of the screen now!
> For it's this very flatness
> that the frailly projected containment of the humanized body
> is designed to be pinned to
> by, naturally, forces outside our control.

The lines have a syntax. They're a progression, not a group. But more than in my two previous books of poems, *To the Reader* and *Primer*, here I'm finding more gaps & uncompletable sentences. (More examples of this later.) Rather than the "new sentence," as Ron Silliman has named it, I'm building a sentence-like, or paragraph-like gestalt, quasi-narrative, out of broken-off sentences, phrases. There're syntactic breaks, but a semantic plane, across which the meaning moves, snowballing over gaps.

(The next poem I'll read, "Person," will give you a good idea of this. The stanza I just read is a small example.)

But as the incompletability grows more pronounced, I'm also using more repetition, deictics, speechlike elements which posit a co-presence of "speaker & listener," i.e., writer & reader. Internal frames grow out of the rhetoric & repetition: not an externally applied thematics.

> It can't be the knobs' fault because this is back before knobs.
> Rock ledges, laurel fumes, sacred fainting spells
> later on in the very pictures written, this is back before the alphabet
> the pictures of the rocks in the savant's eye
> he's chained to these pictures by the sententious wriggle
> of the buttocks two classes down, whose owner
> can hardly speak, can't multiply, and stands there waiting for Plato

to have Socrates tell him he's only rhetoric.
But, as we know from Aristotle, Plato doesn't know any plots
he can only give orders, dipping himself diffidently into the material
signifier at the same time as the ripples he thinks he's thinking
into their roundness come back to haunt him in the form of crude
jokes about his square calves at unprestigious dinners. In fact he
looks a little like that table he's always using as an example.
Next come the Romans, and with them we first we the sky
artificial creation of scarcity of meaning
spread out over the proletariat as a visible economic ether.
You can look, but it costs.

We can still see traces
of the tracts where they lived
and can still understand their language
which consisted entirely of dirty jokes about money.
It's easy to clear away the froth of biology
with a few words
to reveal the naked postcard of ageless windwashed marble
holding still for recorded history.

"Internal frames" is not a precise usage, but what I'm pointing to are such things as the mock-history (true history) of sex & philosophy, which grows out of the didactic tone of "It's these very acts that we must / Pay attention to the flatness of the screen now!" and the repetition of "very."

What I'm working towards here is to reinforce both perceptibility and, in quotes, "perceptibility," the contingency of perception. I mean, hopefully, the clean, money-free body at the beginning and the naked postcard of culture at the end are more than just a conceptual, thematic rhyme. I want their emphasized "clarity" to reveal itself as a reification, a false picture. I want the body & culture to mutually impossibilize each other as separable entities.

Not that I'm "not trying to say anything." But these clear pictures that are so readily available to our so-called consciousnesses are static & hypnotic. I want to say that.

Next poem: "Person." If the image of Ronald Reagan or Barbara Walters is a person, a lot of Shiites and Nicaraguans and inhabitants of Soweto don't get to be persons. Outside of the charmed narratives of Mastercard and Salvation, there's just this vale of tears, a giant slag heap of narrative waste.

PERSON

Eats, drinks, sticks pipe in mouth and asks

What society (books on varnished desk, vanished races, where have I
smelled that smell before I was born, a kind of hard-headed
pragmatism standing in the empty spaces ...
What society has ever not fashioned a human
recepticle for its narrative wastes?
C'est la guerre the garage the riding mower
the obstrusive stories that don't stop when the sun goes down all at
once like a physical short story
low blood sugar lowering the rate of vocabulary utilization
the world the universe the mind of god cushioning the fall of the dead
letter
water coming into the river from an unknown source.
Sometimes you just have go lie down with the unnamed by-products.

The poem's own relation to narrative is thorny. If I'm remembering correctly, this poem resulted from the tensions in the title. I started thinking about the word "person": so impersonal, problematic, almost a hoax, but so obvious, I myself for instance ... The rest "followed," after a lot of revision and finally a trip to bathroom of the Hi-Fi softserve icecream stand in Cloverdale, where I saw the graffiti that concludes the poem. The narrative in the poem proceeds by a mix of reaction and relaxation. When the level of reaction was high, things get quite jumpy.

They have no names, not because people are stupid
but because there's no place on the tray to put all the slides.
Plus the fact that food is fashion and thus
bites the hand that eats it
or, to put it differently
the Great Salt Flats are the thighs of what conceivable being
the wood from whose Proust no contractor
no matter how liberal the building codes
glass houses conceived in sin from day one
blizzards of chance down on the fountain of youth
all without a verb
because capitalism makes nouns
and burns the connections.

Syntactic jumping, quite self-reactive (for instance, at one point, I noticed I wasn't using any verbs), but, like I say, the semantic push is fairly steady. By the end of the stanza what's in evidence is a capitalistic landscape of nouns and unnamed by-products, where connection is discouraged. (As in no unions.)

I don't want to burn the connections. I don't want to mime the culture.

Words get forced, like the fugitive in *The 39 Steps*
into making a speech about what? ending in cheers with the speaker in handcuffs.
And in fact one's own crudely physical body has never been in this second before, it's less likely than it looks, imagine a TV growing legs and talking, if a TV could talk we wouldn't understand it.

The reified narratives of our culture, like the TV shows, are giant nouns, hypnotically clear and present. But behind the clarities are real killings.

The intimate journal protects its secrets.
The intimate flesh projects its secrets.
In the bathroom: Kill a (Jew crossed out) Nazi.

Next poem: "Speeches to a City No Larger Than the Reach of a Single Voice." The title refers to Plato ideal-sized city, one that's phonocentric. This appeals to me because I write sound, which is directly political, taking place in the present. Our own culture is indirectly phonocentric, too, but in an atomized sense: walkmen & images of the great communicator in the living room.

In the first stanza, we have the Modernist: an engineer, precise, map-making, slave-driving, originary-classicist, piloting his trireme "forever":

One says: My method involves
causing my impervious bucket
in a very real way, to enter a particular wave
in a particular place, so that the aperture
admits exactly enough water to fill the interior
bucket as sentence, with the handle, handle as readership
chained to the benches of the galley
by my earlier terminological conquests
of the formerly merely wet ocean
now charted, drawn & quartered, so that
my trireme is as if self-propelled
and is, in a very real way, unsinkable.

Opposed to this one is the beautiful, slight, pathetic Adonis, the eternally momentary Romantic:

The other says: I have no method.
I merely undress in powerful moonlight
delighting the wretched few

and plunge in and drown each time.

And slaloming serenely out from this dialectical impasse/impulse comes the "I" (I hope no one will think that I'm "I"): a textbook post-Modernist: eclectic, bathed in media, awash in commodities that come from plundering other countries & classes:

> I say: I turn to *Dallas*, to baseball, to Prince, sushi, fractals
> —note the intrusive plane of explanation
> tied up finally in some diplomatic pouch of noncombatant pro-life pro-choice pre-ontology movie-like stasis—I mean
> a person, in quotes, on earth, quotes
> sited in the aporia of toilet paper in Nicaragua
> of jobs in Youngstown, if you don't already own the shopping center then go shopping, which is why in the later afternoon on weekdays, after the heat of the searing sexual repression and age war of midday has abated, and the talk shows have grown cool and delightfully empty with discussions of kitchens and embarrassing moments
> which allows the viewer to go out and turn
> theory into practice, in short
> to rule the world
> until the news at six enacts the State ...
> And now I see that some enchanter has spoken my words.

I'm thrown off balance by that last line. I've thought to drop it, and thus leave intact the analysis of Oppression-by-the-State into Hypnosis-by-the-Media (See Steve McCaffery's "And Who Remembers Bobby Sands?" in *Poetics Journal* 5). The "I" here "starts anywhere"—the beginning of the stanza was quite automatic and then proceeded by crisscrossed self-conscious reflection—but somehow by the end the analysis reaches clarity: the news at six does enact the State. But it's a clarity that's aimless & static: what good does it do?

No "I" is going to reach any useful kinds of clarity, especially not while "critically" watching TV.

Nor, as the following poem suggests, will any single reader perceive "Truth"; the conditions of separation reading involves are too powerful:

> WE
>
> We have come here today to be plural
> sit in rows or sprawl
> in the wind-tunnel of design competition

to find out how many a dollar will buy
eyes focused on the spinning disk, the picture.

Everyone is singular
impersonating corn gods, matching colors
mating, prying apart the lifestyle
of the class above
detached priests, angels with wings of erotic syntax.

Have we agreed on the plot?
Apparently not.
The stories get squashed: colorless incomprehensible bits dehydrating
on Consumer's tray
or they grow larger than life: day
after day of Reagan's sense of humor.

We get left off in Afghanistan
that solemn trysting place of the advanced ascetic journalist.
A woman, of indefinite age, dressed as Truth, is seen (note the passive),
veiled
coming down a long winding dusty path
so slowly that, some centuries, she seems
not to advance at all (please turn to page 37)

My answer to the Committee for Accuracy in Media.

I want to keep insisting on the contingencies that writing involves. One is class. In my sarcastic, self-transparent categories, we have "wings of erotic syntax" above, and "the sententious"—i.e., rhetorical—"wriggle of the slave's buttocks" below. Even in a poem like the following, where near the end there's a very emphatic sense of the generative rush language can provide, the end itself slashes across that with a fact from a quite different order:

GROWING UP

The little devil is happy swinging on the gates of Hell
and I have only to hear myself say "Sit down and eat"
to hear the hinges creak
oiled with the human integer
raised to the highest power.

Next to the gate, a stream is running
always a little further on and

there's always water to drink and a dry throat
because the hellish mistake the historicized body
the dividing mind the newspaper hat the sunnysideup president
Stand back! Get some water somebody! He's fainted or faking or
painted.

And you thought battleships meant jobs.
And thought meant classrooms and you and tedious
romance after hours, beer on the stereo
all the illegible ills schizophrenia spells
on capitalism's know-nothing body.

Like "bulwark" in sci-fi spaceships
there is "process" and "structure"
and "an obscure desire to run one's finger round the rim of the teacup in
time to the eternal return of Bastille Day."

And there is, and here
the list came on like puberty, silent and internally enormous
fallen from some great height
and the devil felt a roar of benevolence rushing through the veins of his
forehead as his instincts mated, each with its word, like a mass
Moonie wedding, only the God of State had fallen apart, and the
cisterns, pipes, aquaducts, barns, cribs were full, and earth was
matter, running water, people, asleep possibly, or amused by their
non-narrative bodies.
It was like talking, the whole language at once, it *was* talking, myself,
say anything and I scatter.
Helicopter shadow rides up the side of the apartment house.

I'm working against transcendence. (That's the name of the sculpture in the plaza of the Bank of America Building in San Francisco.)

"SUPPOSE NOISES HAD A SPECIAL NAME"

But they don't and General Vessey leading cheers
of "Hurray for God!" is proof.
Far back in the brain, the hot line, alight with sentiments of
tyrannosaurus and tank munching straight through graphs of time
connecting to the other on the other end, who doesn't answer.
Third person in Arabic grammar = the absent one.

Human bits of bread and the repressed wages
of work and sound, bodies contain enough silence to break
the circular tunes caught by camera and held
outside the frame as they walk to elections
rigged under cover of the big book, which will leave you & me out,
always
in the name of the absent one.

At this point let me introduce Derrida's statement: "The absence of a transcendental signified stretches the play of signification to infinity." My translation: "God is dead, so any word can mean everything." But Derrida has just switched the transcendence to the other side: he's made words his god. It reminds me of atomic power's early boast: that it would provide power too cheap to meter. "Meaning will be everywhere on that glorious day. All you'll have to do is run your finger lightly and playfully across the texture of the want ads ..."

Short stories, hierarchies of address, slide shows, Proust, building codes, movies, TV, journals, graffiti—these systems are far from being endless oceans whose surfaces, placid as a lake above a calendar, stretch to infinity shivering in a never-ending jouissance to the dance of the signifying ripples. That image is just the reflection of privileged positions of control. Such systems interact, add up in complex historical ways that kill some people, while enabling others to live. These things *count*.

LET'S SAY

A page is being beaten
back across the face of "things."
Inside me there's a little book of no color, its pages riffling as I
breathe, a moving point, torn out
and I read this scrapbook of desire
let's not say constantly
asleep & provoked by the economics of cliffs, galleys, cartoons,
explosive devices patterned to look like adults reading signs
casually, very fast
and in this wind, leavened by sun
or am I merely reading that
backwards, inside the restaurant where they serve the parts
by number, innuendo
and the you and the I spends its life
trying to read the bill
alone in the dark

big wide streets lined with language glue

Here, the continual reification of language—books, scrap-books, menus, neon signs—feels violent. Whereas speech can feel like a kind of orgy, tho here the orgy is couched in terms of pulp:

A page is being written.
It's fun to chew, to work things out
to close the damn book
to sit in the sand with a radio
no bikini no tan line no body
a dream matchup
you can either go in or out, no middle ground
the floor is sexualized, tessellated with little languages crying out speak
me, squash me, love me up into one libidinous hunk of noise, you
great big missing other, yoo hoo, over here
and the finished word is an album of past pleasures
smoking out one last incomprehensible nuance beside still waters
that talk their talk
of which you are the noun
the one & only
and the model breaks, leaving
a nasty little landscape which *you*
and the group of course
the other the slaughtered city the strafed farms
silently
in large heated buildings
the smell means money
and the classics are being straddled
a page is being beaten
O parse me, says the son to the so-called absent father
in a suit by the lakefront in Cleveland
sixty degrees and a fishing pole
the breeze or am I reading water again

The reader and the writer, "the you and the I," are such languages transforming into pulp languages, non-languages and back, degraded, exploded, overburdened systems of public & private address. There's no inner escape from our environment, where such powerful emblems of coersion as USA TODAY constantly conflate the initials U.S. with their editorial staff and with "us," so that "we" read that "we" are buoyed by the progress of the Salvadoran army or that "we" are attending more ballgames than ever this summer.

In face of this and millions of other like facts, it's tempting to posit the communicatory circle as an answer, with all validity inhering in the incorruptibly local circuit of you & I in real time. The following poem yields a bit to that, I think—exchange being, if not an answer, a place to start.

THE BROKEN MIRROR

From the stately violence of the State
a classic war, World War Two, punctuated by Hiroshima
all the action classically taking place on one day
visible to one group in invisible terms
beside a fountain of imagefree water
"trees" with brown "trunks" and "leafy" green crowns
50s chipmonks sitting beneath, buck teeth representing
mental tranquillity, they sit in rows
and read their book and the fountain gushes forth
all the letters at once, permanently
a playful excrescence, an erotic war against nature.

And here's a check for five feet of shelf
in the life-after-death book club, seminar upon seminar
grains of sand the tan body rests on
glorious huge & hypothetical
worth all the bad press human sacrifice has received.

Outside, masses of angry numb matter blow against the symphonic
angles of the citadel, warm & witty with electronically modulated
voice, the earnest look out of the sweater, microphone hidden
casually in memory, clouds a diversified portfolio of sensation.
The pictured body is relaxed & smooth
on the unmade bed, maple syrup, the waffle drenched
not a sentence, a way of life, the way out.

But I don't want to have to recreate the very ground of being
it's supposed to create me, like it said it did already
intelligibility aside, monumentality of social decay aside
food & water & explanations of hierarchies to last a lifetime
aside, out of the way, out to a lunch of human bit parts broken under
the State.
I don't want to improvise, in a foreign language
my own, but in the wrong mouth, my own
a parody of my mostly silent dreams, I don't want to

—I'm melting, all my lovely inwardness—make love
to the middle of the World Bank's picture of a person.

Let language, that sports page of being
mystify its appearance in all speech writing thought tonight
so that the thing, that object of burnished flirtation
can smuggle out the self, that drill bit ...

But why am I contracting for the construction of this life-like place-like
spilling-over lived-in
if only for a moment or memory-shape, since readwriting is a mirror
backward at best, of prior intent
while you sit before me (note the you-as-I circuit, banquet with masses
of flowers, choirs, cranial blooms lit up, sacred, edible)

I'll close with "Oedipus Rex." Here, I think, the play generated itself out from the tension between the first two words, "extinct cities." Suddenly, in line four, Kreon and the royal we appeared and I found myself writing one of the originary classics of Western literature. It was Fate.

Kreon, later in the poem, speaks from the position of a dour transcendent condemnation, representing the voice of God. But when he first speaks, he's quite "out of character." Similarly, oppositely, Oedipus starts out being the character Oedipus, but by the end he's saying things much like those I myself might say, if I were to describe where & when I live.

OEDIPUS REX

Extinct cities, their driven people still visible
in old sounds, I'll have to make this brief, time
to go, birds flying south, I'm double parked, here
comes Kreon now, just as we are mentioning him.
What news, ancient uncle, from the transcendental desktop?

KREON: The people, hemmed in by liberal playgrounds
and rightwing communication systems, are dead
or dying. No one's complaining, mind you, but with the inauguration
just hours away the sky seems to be crumbling, and the decibel
level in some stadiums is below that of Mallarmé's tomb.
God thought you should know.

OEDIPUS: Tell god that I've got a family and long hours
of being myself to consider, how to explain things

so that meals don't degenerate into chaos and we eat
each other, like your nation states.
It would be like nuclear winter to me if I couldn't support my family
with the sheer flexible power of my separated words.

KRE: God wants you to die.

OED: Tell God that my desires are infinite, if unfit
for human consumption. Sense perception
is a thing of the past. Myths spill over
into the present. I'm one
with the machines that go boom in the night.
You may be a mere bureaucratic bug in the rug, a sad hole with an
abstract smile coming home to roost on your obsessed statue
but I've got a problematic nest egg of involuntary memory, I remember
most of my old girlfriends, personal stuff, priceless, but not so
very interesting to you or God or anyone else. So finally
I'm just going to say no
to physical forces, matter, and predestination.

KRE: Since you're going to die, God wants to see you repent.

OED: You can reprint any of my old speeches
but I doubt that God will be able to tell them apart from anything
anyone else ever said.
I think I'll just stand pat.
I never meant to soliloquize, but since the government's gotten so big
& secret, any jerk with an open mouth's in the center of an
infinitely expanding universe of gloom & doom, each sound that
comes out, even if it's just asking where there's a bathroom
downtown, contains lonely world-shattering forces, Magellanic
clouds, hot winds to obliterate all human obstruction.
But keeping silent just subsidizes television.
And the past is so addictive, it takes longer and longer ...
It all turns into a story, like my body ...

BRUCE ANDREWS

REVIEW

NEVER WITHOUT ONE
New York: Roof Books

by Diane Ward

Nerves focus, deference to time, electrical body, the power-source oxygen explodes. Facts start up, irresistible collision of non-solids lightens any proverb. Mechanism, or the borders deflected, language, partners, an imagination habit, hands convention evaporates. Facts begin to scale senses, pleasure. Lines of sight, imprints rotate, criss-cross, music forecloses on the initials. Will tell you what's on. Eye by eye, jeopardy equivocates, distance splicing the brain together, misdemeaning, braille, climate, proof; clutch and brake. Meanings heat up, maps transact, costumes, from the inside—counterpunching privacy holds us captive = slang, drawn neon, gestural thinking, the basic outside, controlled distortion, who are the suspects? Reverie emblems, binocular heart doubt abbreviation; facts value the pronoun armor. Voltage given irretrievable speech. Time-lapse reprograms everything.

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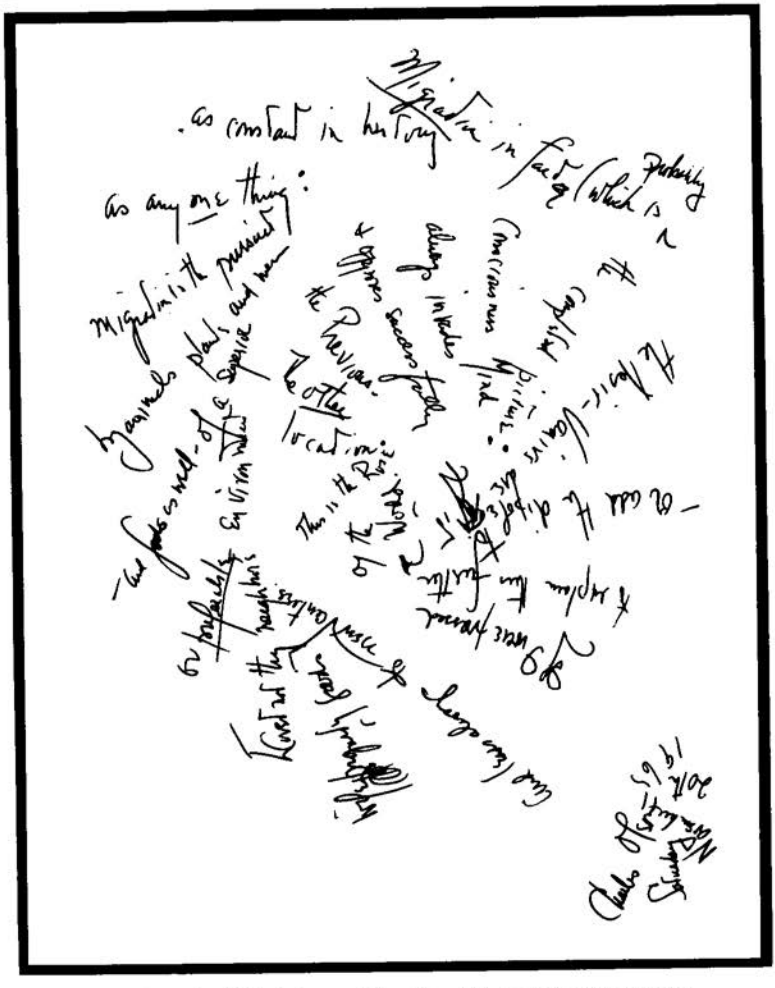

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